

Pendleton Bird Club

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September Birding

Observing Black Rosy-Finches drinking snow melt from patches of fresh snow atop the ridgeline of Steens Mnt. was my *magical* birding experience for September. I was lucky enough to share this with ten other Pendleton Bird Club members who participated in a fall field trip to Malheur Wildlife Refuge this month. Rebecca Hiers has written a delightful summary of this eventful trip that will make those who missed it want to attend next year! Her article follows:

Malheur Birding Trip

September 11-14, 2003

Clear blue skies, the tangy sweet scent of sage, nightly serenades by coyotes, and pleasant company, all made for a wonderful trip to Malheur country. We saw a great deal of wildlife, including a magnificent 6-point Elk, many Pronghorn, 4 Bighorn Sheep, and 127 species of birds. Our trip had many highlights, and I've included a few here.

Our departure day, Thursday, September 11, was Constance Zahl's 92nd birthday, and it also became Woodpecker Day for us. Stopping south of Battle Mountain State Park, we saw not only the Williamson's Sapsucker we were hoping to find, but Red-naped Sapsuckers, a Hairy Woodpecker, a Black-backed Woodpecker, a Pileated Woodpecker, and a Northern Flicker! With 6 different species in one spot, Katherine Skirvin dubbed this place "Woodpecker Knob". Further down the road, near Canyon City, we saw a Downy Woodpecker, our 7th woodpecker species! A few miles south of Seneca, we saw 4 Lewis's Woodpeckers fly-catching over the Silvies River - totaling 8 woodpecker species for the day!

Friday was a great day for wading birds at Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, although the water levels were low, and Benson Pond was completely dry. In a slough alongside Central Patrol Road, June and Duane Whitten spotted a Sora, and when we stopped to look, we found 2 Virginia Rails feeding in the mud beside it. Buena Vista Ponds were full of Great Egrets and Snowy Egrets - who seemed relatively unbothered by a Coyote who casually waded through them across the ponds. We saw both Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs, and Red-necked Phalaropes, while I particularly enjoyed the thrill of discovering a couple of Wilson's Snipes hiding in the grasses. Knox Ponds was a special treat, with six Trumpeter Swans. We also watched a pair of White Pelicans perform synchronized dip-net fishing, dipping their bills into the water side-by-side, and scooping up what was in their path. They passed close enough that we could see their intense eye contact, and Connie Betts observed that the rear pelican would signal to dip with a soft puffing sound. At Refuge Headquarters, Aaron Skirvin spotted a Lincoln Sparrow, and we saw several more Lewis's Woodpeckers.

We knew that Saturday was going to be a great day when we saw three separate Golden Eagles within our first half-hour - one with a rabbit, and surrounded by a cluster of Black-billed Magpies, apparently hoping to share in the breakfast feast. Near Frenchglen, Betty Klepper and Fern Oliver sighted what we excitedly thought might be a Ferruginous Hawk, with a gleaming white front, but which on closer inspection turned out to be a Red-Tailed Hawk in yet another of its many variations. While we were getting quite good at identifying birds, we weren't so on-the-ball in

spotting our Governor, Ted Kulongoski, who approached us with his lovely wife and their beautiful dog. In our defense, however, they were outside of their usual habitat, and in rare vacation plumage. They shared some of their camping experiences with us, and the Governor wished Constance a Happy 92nd Birthday, and congratulated Duane and June on their Fiftieth Wedding Anniversary, which they were celebrating that day.

At the top of Steens Mountain, we saw what we had come for – Black Rosy-Finches! Russ Betts found a good location on a ledge just below the rim to watch them down in a draw, quite a ways below us. We could just identify them by their dark color and bobbing silver helmets as they flitted around. After trying to get a closer look for well over an hour, we were starting to leave, when a flock of about 200 began moving towards us, swarming up higher and higher, until they were within a yard or so from Aaron Skirvin's and Jane Holmes' feet. As they pecked at snow patches, we had excellent close-up views of these lovely little birds. Suddenly, as we were about to leave again, we heard an agitated cheeping, very different from their earlier cheerful chirps, and saw the Black Rosy-Finches take off in a swarm with a Sharp-shinned Hawk in their midst. With some amazing aerial acrobatics, they avoided the hawk, then began mobbing it, ultimately chasing it away. What a show! And all against the backdrop of a glorious view of distant mountains, and the Alvord Desert spreading across the wide valley way, way down below us! Capping off the day, we sighted a Prairie Falcon as we returned to the Field Station.

The next day started off dramatically as well, with two Peregrine Falcons zooming up from Malheur Lake, scattering smaller birds overhead as we stood at Headquarters. Then, on our return trip, Katherine spotted a White-headed Woodpecker at Idlewild Campground – bringing our trip total of woodpecker species to 9!

Overall, it was a great four days! I think I can speak for all of us in saying how much we appreciated Aaron, June and Duane sharing their

knowledge, understanding and passion for birds with us!

Contributed by Rebecca Hiers

Calendar of Events

Pendleton Bird Club Meeting

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

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

June and Duane Whitten present:
South of the Border: Birding Down Mexico
Way

6th Annual Open House at Blue Mountain **Wildlife Rehabilitation & Education** **Center**

October 4, 2003 1-4 pm

71046 Appaloosa Lane, Pendleton
For information call 541-278-0215

- Tour the flight pens
- Meet the education birds
- Learn about birds of prey
- Join Jim Nelson & his Harris's Hawk in a falconry demonstration
- Support Blue Mountain Wildlife!

The BIG SIT

Are you ready for some fun? Put October 12, 2003 on your calendar and plan to spend all or any part of that day SITTING and watching birds!

This is a national, or possibly international, event, somewhat like a Big Day or a Bird-a-thon in that the object is to tally as many bird species as can be seen or heard within 24 hours. The difference lies in the area limitation (a 17-foot circle) from which you can sit and observe birds. Bring a chair and possibly we will have a picnic and enjoy the birds. We will sign up for times and no one needs to stay any longer than he or she wants. Here are the rules:

1. Observations can be made from any area within the state/country you live, or wish to represent.
2. Observations can only be made from within a 17-foot (diameter) circle.
3. There is no limit to how many people can occupy one area (other than the obvious spatial limitations). Bring some chairs. Have a picnic or barbecue. Welcome passers-by and add their contributions to your list.
4. If a bird is seen or heard from within the circle but is too distant to identify, the circle can be left to get a closer look/listen for confirmation. However, any new bird seen or heard while confirming the original, cannot be counted unless it's seen or heard from an "anchor" who stayed behind in your circle, or when you return to the circle.
5. The participants can work in shifts. No one person needs to be there throughout the whole Big Sit! The area can be left and returned to as frequently as desired, but you must be sure to return to the exact spot each time.
6. The same circle must be used for the entire Big Sit.
7. The Big Sit will begin at 12:00 a.m. midnight on October 12, 2003 and end 24 hours later.

If we have enough people participating, we could do two, or even more, areas, within the county. (We are registered to participate in this free event, tentatively for McKay Reservoir).

The data will be sent to the person in charge. The event is sponsored by the New Haven Bird Club, Bird Watcher's Digest and Swarovski Optik. Three categories are:

1. Best Overall Count (Most species seen by a single circle)
2. Best State Count (Highest combined total from circles within a state--wins State "braggin' rights")
3. The Big Prize! Swarovski Optik is offering \$500 to the circle who finds the "Golden Bird." One bird is drawn from all of the species reported. Then every circle that saw that bird will compete in a drawing for the "Golden Bird."

Summer Wanes at Mission Ponds

The month of September heralds big changes at Mission Ponds — some of them subtle, some of them obvious. Whether you are a bird “just passing through” or one of our local feathered residents looking for a meal or place to rest, these seasonal changes can impact your existence — for better or for worse.

One of the more subtle changes noticeable is the dying shoreline vegetation. The hint of yellow on the willow leaves that dot the levees and pond borders suggest fall is just around the corner. This annual die-back makes it easier to catch a glimpse of creatures big and small — from the white-tailed deer fawn that comes down for a cool drink to the grasshoppers that scurry away from foraging upland birds such as quail and pheasant. For shorebirds, song birds and upland birds, foraging in the open can invite danger from birds of prey that sit motionless along the fringe of the pond awaiting their next meal.

The most obvious change during September is the drop in water level at the west pond. During drought years (such as the year we are currently experiencing) this pond can actually dry up — or come very close to it. Shorebirds, herons, and waterfowl (and at least one egret species) use this low water period to feed on the many forms of insect life that congregate in the retreating pools.

As a bonus there are also fish in Mission Ponds, much to the delight of the osprey which trek back and forth daily between the ponds and their nests during the breeding season. Two active osprey nests can be found within two miles of the ponds.

I (Jack) once asked Terry Clarke (Mission Ponds' co-landowner) how the fish came to be in the ponds and he said he had no idea because he had never planted fish in either pond. This leaves one to speculate that years ago some well-meaning soul must have unceremoniously dumped their pet goldfish in the hope of giving them a new lease on life. Whoever you were — the osprey, herons and shorebirds send their undying gratitude!

At least three species of wading birds regularly visit the ponds during August and September, including Great Blue Heron, Black-crowned

Night-Heron and a rare visitor — the beautiful and graceful all-white Great Egret.

I happened to spot two egrets this past spring on May 27th near the dike road 400 yards west of the ponds and saw two more wading the south end of the west pond on August 30. Four additional Pendleton Bird Club members spotted Great Egrets just a few weeks ago during late August / early September.

Aaron Skirvin, who is conducting a bird survey with June and Duane Whitten at the ponds, recorded seeing one Great Egret last year on August 28. June and Duane Whitten saw two this year on August 29. Are the same birds using the pond from year to year? Possibly so. Apparently these birds are passing to and from their summer / winter feeding grounds because they are only briefly spotted during spring and late summer. Definitely a treat for those of us who don't get to see birds associated with more tropical climates.

Speaking of treats, *nineteen* Bird Club members gathered the morning of September 1st at Mission Ponds to check out the local bird action. Decked out with all forms of binoculars, spotting scopes and at least one telescope, Club members were treated to shorebird activity at the south entrance of the west pond where a very low water line concentrated Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Long-billed Dowitcher, Wilson's Snipe, a solitary (no pun intended) Solitary Sandpiper, numerous Killdeer and a Least Sandpiper.

While the peep (small sandpiper) population may have been down from previous weeks, Aaron says there are many more Yellowlegs at this site than at McKay Reservoir south of Pendleton. One of the things that made the viewing memorable was that Club members could compare differences between Greater and Lesser Yellowleg characteristics — something easily accomplished when the two species are foraging side-by-side. Aaron also brought to our attention the subtle differences in feeding behavior between the two species.

Just as the birds were settling in for their morning snack (or snooze) a distress call rang out and dozens of birds were suddenly in the air

squawking and squealing! Seconds later the reason for the panic cruised by — a female Northern Harrier out for her morning reconnaissance! Though she did not attempt to take prey on that pass it was clear how much respect the shorebirds gave her — all except one. Through all the commotion the Solitary Sandpiper sat motionless at the water's edge. *Neat stuff!!*

Other birds of prey at Mission Ponds observed this past year included Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, American Bald Eagle, Red-tailed Hawk, American Kestrel and Prairie Falcon. No doubt the occasional Peregrine Falcon has harassed the local bird population too but no Club member has been there to witness it yet (*hint! hint!*).

After the Harrier sighting Club members made their way to the east pond where numerous puddle duck species were seen feeding on the water or preening on a rock island at the far end of the pond. Though it may seem too early for the waterfowl migration to take place, this is the time of year when early migrant duck species typically visit the ponds.

Early migrant ducks at the east pond included Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler, American Wigeon and Green-winged Teal. Local ducks we saw included Mallard and a family of four juvenile Wood Ducks. Rounding out the list was a sighting of a Pied-billed Grebe.

How many ducks did we see? Maybe forty. This pales to the estimated flock of 4,000 mallard and wigeon I saw land in a five minute period two years ago at the pond in early February. *Yes!* The pond can hold that many ducks and it is a sight (and sound) to behold and something you will not want to miss. Stay tuned for the waterfowl migration reports in the coming months. With any luck the Tundra Swans will also make their annual appearance at the ponds in mid-October on their way to winter feeding grounds. Hundreds of Canada Geese also use the ponds regularly during the winter months.

Just about the time we were ready to return to our vehicles, the Great Egret made its appearance. Swooping low over the water it made a pass over the preening ducks before

settling on a dead branch over-hanging the pond. What a way to end the morning — friends all around!

What to look for in October? The Mission Ponds bird survey lists 35 species of birds sighted in October of 2002, so dust off the objective lens on your binoculars and prepare for an Indian Summer bird expedition. Here is a sample of the diversity of birds you might see on any given day in October — Great Blue Heron, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Tundra Swan, Canada Goose, N. Pintail, Wood Duck, Gadwall, Mallard, Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, N. Harrier, Long-billed Dowitcher, Ring-billed Gull, Downy Woodpecker, N. Flicker, Am. Crow, Bewick's Wren, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Song Sparrow, W. Meadowlark, Red-winged Blackbird. Note also that the birds of prey migration is underway this time of year too. Though a little early, you might luck out and spot a Bald Eagle feeding on a salmon carcass on the shore of the Umatilla River. (I've seen them cruising ½ mile upriver / down river from the ponds as winter settles in.)

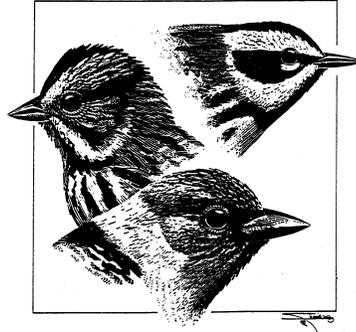
Don't forget — All three miles of the dike road adjacent to the south shore of the Umatilla River is open to the public by foot, bike or horseback starting at the Mission Bridge (one-half mile north of the Mission Store at the flashing light on Mission Road). Parking is minimal so use caution. Make a day of it with the family and enjoy the birds and the fall foliage.

Happy Birding!

Jack Simons

August – September Bird Sightings

Shorebirds continue to be the focus of most birding efforts during the late summer months. Thus most reports are again from Cold Springs and McKay Reservoirs and Mission Ponds.



Cold Springs Reservoir:

Craig and Judy Corder continue to census the birds at Cold Springs and the following is a summary of their efforts. On August 20, the Corders found 200 **Western Sandpipers** as well as 10 **Least Sandpipers**. By August 25, this number had increased to **500 Western** and **75 Least Sandpipers**. On the same day they also found 35 **Red-necked Phalaropes** and 35 **Western Grebes**. However a **MERLIN** making passes at all the shorebirds was the highlight of the day. On September 1, Paul Sullivan found 10 **Baird's Sandpipers** at the Reservoir. The **MARBLED GODWIT** located by Craig and Judy on September 3, may be the "best" bird found at Cold Springs this season. On September 6, a **Common Tern** and **Franklin's Gull** were noted. On September 7, the Corders found 2 **Solitary Sandpipers**, 37 **Baird's Sandpipers**, 15 **Pectoral Sandpipers**, a **SEMIPALMATED SANDPIPER** and over **300 Killdeer**.

McKay Reservoir and Mission Ponds:

Both of these areas have provided interesting birding this summer. Many species of larger shorebirds were observed at Mission Ponds before the shallow ponds dried up, while McKay seemed to be the place to observe peeps. During this report period, some of the more common shorebird species found at Mission Ponds included numerous **Greater** and **Lesser Yellowlegs**, **Killdeer**, **Solitary Sandpiper**, **Long-billed Dowitcher**, and **Wilson's Snipe**. Although not a shorebird, perhaps the most exciting find at Mission Ponds were **2 GREAT EGRETS** found by June and Duane Whitten on August 29. This is a difficult bird to find in

Umatilla County. Luckily, one of the birds was relocated during the PBC (Pendleton Bird Club) fieldtrip to the ponds on September 1. At McKay Reservoir the most common shorebird species reported included **Semipalmated Plover, Killdeer, Spotted Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, Baird's Sandpiper, Red-necked Phalarope and Pectoral Sandpiper**. The PBC owes a big "Thank You" to Aaron Skirvin for hosting a number of field trips to these two areas during the last month.

Other Sightings:

After I reported **Mountain Quail** as being a "rare" bird in Umatilla County in the last newsletter, Mike Denny found **54 Mountain Quail** along the North Fork John Day River Road. 22 were in Grant County and 32 in Umatilla County. On August 28, Jack Simons found a **Lewis's Woodpecker** about ¼ mile from the Mission Ponds. On September 4, he found another **Lewis's Woodpecker** near the same location. Jack also reported finding a flock of **Cedar Waxwings** at his home along the Umatilla River. On September 7, Wyatt Whitten, (June and Duane's grandson) found a

Great Gray Owl off Forest Road 31, along the Whitman Overlook Road. On September 9, Craig and Judy Corder found a **LEAST FLYCATCHER** at Hat Rock State Park. This is another great find in Umatilla County. In addition to the shorebirds already reported, PBC members found a **Cooper's Hawk, 5 American Pipits and 7 Greater White-fronted Geese** on the September 6, fieldtrip to McKay Reservoir. Although not in Umatilla County, Mike and MerryLynn Denny have found a number of exciting birds along the Columbia River at the mouth of the Walla Walla River near Wallula. During a four-day period starting September 12, they reported **4 PARASITIC JAEGERS, 2 SABINE'S GULLS, 39 COMMON TERNS** and **8 HERRING GULLS**. Hopefully, some of these birds will travel down river to Umatilla County in time for the fall migration count!

Please report your bird sightings to Dave Herr at 276-6413 or by e-mail, dsherr@oregontrail.net

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