

# Pendleton Bird Club

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NEWSLETTER Volume 2, No. 3 Pendleton, Oregon March 2004

## **We're One Year Old!**

This is the 13<sup>th</sup> consecutive monthly issue of the Pendleton Bird Club's newsletter, and that means the club is one year old this month! It seems like just a short time ago when 17 local birders assembled at Pendleton's River Parkway for what turned out to be a cool and drizzly, but fun, bird walk along the River Parkway. That eventful day was March 8, 2003, and marked the beginning of the Pendleton Bird Club.

After the bird walk, the birders gathered at a local restaurant for an organizational meeting of the club. The club's initiating members agreed on the purposes of the club: (1) *Promote recreational birding for all birders, from beginner to expert, and provide a forum for sharing in the enjoyment and experience of birding;* (2) *Contribute to our knowledge of wild birds and their habits, distribution, and habitat in Umatilla County and adjacent areas;* (3) *Inform the public on the appreciation of wild birds and their conservation;* and (4) *Promote the conservation of birds and their habitats.*

My, how we've grown in our first year; this month we will send this newsletter to nearly 140 members. The club has blossomed in many other ways, too. We have conducted regular field trips; held club meeting every other month; started a bluebird trail; assisted the SMILE kids in building bluebird boxes; participated in the Spring and Fall North American Migration Counts, the Big Sit, and Umatilla County Christmas Bird Count; collaborated with S.U.R.E to decorate a tree for the Festival of Trees; and established a website. Our first year has, indeed, been busy and productive.

Changes to the club's meetings and field trips schedules are in the works. At our February club meeting, the

attendees voted to hold monthly field trips, and no evening meetings, from May through September. Instead, we will concentrate on outdoor activities when the weather is warmer. We will hold evening meetings once every other month, between October and April. We will schedule winter field trips as well.

Our second year promises to be just as eventful and fun as the first, as we continue to fulfill the club's purposes. Because of your strong participation and interest in club activities, the Pendleton Bird Club should thrive in the years to come. Perhaps we should take another small step forward and show our confidence in the future of the club by choosing a name for the newsletter before many more months pass.

## **Calendar of Events**

### **Othello Sandhill Crane Festival**

March 26, 27, and 28

Othello, WA is located north of Tri-Cities  
For more information: 509-488-2802 ext. 100  
Website: [www.othellosandhillcranefestival.org](http://www.othellosandhillcranefestival.org)

### **Pendleton Bird Club Meeting**

Thursday, April 8, 2004 7:30pm  
First Christian Church  
Pendleton, OR  
(Across from the Pendleton Arts Center)  
Louie Dick presents  
*Birds in Indian Culture*

## **2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Wildlife Rehab. Seminar**

Hosted by Blue Mountain Wildlife

**April 10, 2004**

Advanced registration is requested by April 3rd.  
Registration information: contact Lynn Tompkins,  
541-278-0215 or [raptor@uci.net](mailto:raptor@uci.net)

## **Native Plant Society of Oregon Field Trip**

The local chapter of the NPSO will hold a field trip on April 17 to the Stateline Wind Farms. For more information and to RSVP, contact Jerry Baker at 541-566-2244.

## **North American Spring Migration Count**

Saturday, May 8, 2004

Contact Aaron Skirvin, Umatilla County Coordinator –  
276-1948 or [skirvins@uci.net](mailto:skirvins@uci.net)

## **S.U.R.E.'s Annual Umatilla River Cleanup**

Saturday, May 22, 2004

The event will start at 7 a.m. with a bird walk along the River Parkway in Pendleton. For more information, contact Betty Klepper at 276-8416

## **Pendleton Bird Club Website**

If you haven't visited the bird club's new website, [www.pendletonbirders.org](http://www.pendletonbirders.org), we highly recommend it. The website has lots of useful information about local birds. You can take the bird ID challenge, read our current and archived newsletters, learn about the club's bluebird trail. Find out which species have been sighted in Umatilla County; report your sightings for the 2004 Umatilla County composite bird list. Click on the links to view spectacular bird photographs, or better yet, contribute your own bird photographs to the club members' photo gallery. Check the website frequently, since some of the features change weekly. Many thanks to Jack Simons, the club's webmaster, for his superb and artful design and management of the website.

## **Used Binoculars Needed**

To help our local elementary school classes on bird walks, Stewards of the Umatilla River Environment (S.U.R.E.) would like to acquire old binoculars that you

no longer need. Last year a group of S.U.R.E. volunteers led three fifth grade classes from Washington School on field trips along Pendleton's River Parkway to look at birds. We borrowed enough binoculars to allow students to share them, but prefer a more permanent arrangement since we plan to do this educational activity for the next several years. Our goal is to have 10 to 20 binoculars housed at the Education Service District (ESD) office and available for teachers to check out as needed. We have made arrangements with ESD to do just that! If you have old, but still useable, binoculars that you would like to donate, please call either Betty Klepper (276-8416) or Lorna Waltz (276-6353). If you wish to take the donation off your taxes, you might go onto the internet and look at eBay or other websites where you can determine the value of the donated binoculars. We will provide you with the proper receipt for tax purposes, but cannot help you with the evaluation. If you have an old pair of binoculars, please consider donating them for this worthwhile purpose. S.U.R.E. and the school children thank you for your donation.

*Contributed by Betty Klepper*

## **Spring Birds**

In one of his wonderful short poems, Spain's Antonio Machado, the peasant poet of the Duero River Valley, said,

Spring has come  
No one knows how.

And we don't, yet the multiple signs-- some subtle, others manifest-- of the season's emergence from the near-death of winter make Spring's appearance unmistakable and utterly charged with the vibrancy of the intrinsic meanings of the annual renewal of life: quiet greening of grasses; reddening of willows; quickening of alders; bold reproductive enriching of lichens and mosses; shooting daffodils, narcissus, and paperwhites; seemingly overnight blooming of crocus in the forest and rooster combs on the highlands; and, of course, the birds.

At our place between Cayuse and Thornhollow what is the first spring bird is a mystery. Some years it is a busy little flock of Wigeon, or the sudden appearance of a male Wood Duck. Other times it's a Varied Thrush, or Red-winged Blackbird, or Killdeer whose song or cry joins the tough birds who have wintered here. Whatever the harbinger, the first robins signal the warming of the earth and true birdsong begins with different parts of the orchestra coming from brush and tree, swamp and hillside, pasture and pond—a complex and surprising

native composition sometimes entering into a concerto-like competition with calls of a thousand small frogs. We watch and listen and are filled anew with amazement and happiness for this world again bursting with desire around us. We've counted about sixty species of birds that nest here. Aaron Skirvin bets that there are more than one-hundred in our little section of Umatilla County. We can't wait to learn about that forty or so to which we've been blind.

This past weekend we drifted the Grande Ronde from Minam Store to Powatka Bridge above Troy. This is an annual spring Pilgrimage for us and birds are zesty spice to a deep experiential dive into a world dominated by a dense, rushing river and staid canyon rims watched over by towering conifers that speak with the wind. Kingfisher and Ouzel, thriving through snow, ice, and numbing waters cry, "Oh no, it's them again." Bald Eagles watch in silence as we float beneath their perches near the tops of trees. Every fourth or fifth eddy holds paired Mergansers or Canada Geese and from time-to-time we surprise a Great Blue. When the delicious kinesis of the float slows and white water no longer hisses in our ears, the trip is punctuated by the mountain jazz of Song Sparrows and the strident long whistles of the Referee Bird. What's That??? It's another mystery to very limited creatures in this complex universe of reawakening life.

Nothing is so beautiful as Spring  
When weeds in wheels shoot long  
And lovely and lush. Thrush's eggs  
Look little low heavens and thrush  
Through the echoing timber does so  
Rinse and ring the ear it strikes like  
Lightnings to hear him sing.

Poem by G.M. Hopkins, "Spring"

*Contributed by Grey Elliot*

### **Repeat Performance – Pendleton Heronry**

Last year, Great Blue Herons successfully raised two overflowing nests of young just outside Pendleton's city limits. This year it appears that the birds returned for a repeat performance, so grab your binoculars and take a look at this spectacle.

2003 was the first time in decades that herons were observed nesting so close to Pendleton. Previously, the nearest known heronry was approximately 10 miles up the Umatilla River. But two pair of adults each established a nest in the same tree located behind the Little League ball fields at the east end of the Pendleton River Parkway. The tree can be spotted in the pasture

approximately 100 yards north of the Umatilla River between the parkway ramp and the new shelter near the confluence of Wildhorse Creek.

I last saw the heronry in June 2003 and counted 4 fledglings per nest. Both sets of parents obviously excelled at fishing and mousing.

On March 7, 2004, I was delighted to observe **six** Great Blue Herons in the same tree where the birds had established their heronry last year. It appeared that the birds were utilizing both 2003 nests, **plus** I saw individuals roosting in what appeared to be the precursors of two new nests. I did not get to check the heronry again before this went to print; however, others have confirmed that the heronry has doubled in size from its inaugural season.

The River Parkway provides the public with a great opportunity to follow the progress of a heronry as young hatch, develop and fledge. What makes this so unusual is that you can monitor the herons' progress from the comfort of a folding chair with a hot dog, French fries and a ball game.

*Contributed by Paul Daniello*

### **Clean Your Hummingbird Feeders**

If you feed hummingbirds, each spring you may ask yourself, "When should I put up the feeder?" Well, look for the first migrant birds moving through Umatilla County in early April. Put up your feeders by April 10 to help the earliest Calliope and Rufous Hummingbirds on their northward migration.

### **Red-tailed Hawks with Abnormal Beaks**

Observers in western Washington have noted a few Red-tailed Hawks with abnormally long beaks. The beak eventually grows so long that it prevents the birds from eating and has led to starvation in at least five hawks. The cause of the abnormal condition is unknown. Hawk rehabilitators and veterinarians want to document the distribution of the long-billed hawks, capture them, photograph and measure the beaks, take a blood/feather sample, band them and cope their beaks before releasing them. If you see one of these birds, please contact Bud Anderson at (360) 757-1911, [bud@frg.org](mailto:bud@frg.org). Note the date, time and location of your sighting. More information and photos may be viewed at <http://www.frg.org>.

### **March 20 Field Trip to Lower Umatilla Basin**

The first day of spring dawned crisp and clear, bringing a sense of anticipation. Even as we gathered for our Pendleton Bird Club field trip, two recent arrivals to our

region circled over us – a Violet-Green Swallow and a Killdeer, each sounding its own distinctive springtime call.

Change is in the air, and all around us the birds are preparing for spring. Many species travel long distances, returning from as far away as South America. Other birds actually winter here, and are beginning to head as far north as the Arctic Circle. Likewise, our resident species are gearing up for the breeding season. In this dry sagebrush and grassland steppe, much of this activity is hidden – either under cover or simply well-camouflaged. So Craig and Judy Corder, our trip leaders, took us to one of the liveliest places around here - the lower Umatilla Basin and along the Columbia River, where many small ponds draw lots of birds.

Our first stop was some fields just outside Stanfield, where more than 200 newly arrived Sandhill Cranes were feeding. These immense birds have wing-spans of well over 6 feet. Most had their heads down eating, but a few sentinels were standing at their full height of almost 4 feet, watching us watching them. With 18 people and 7 vehicles, we were not exactly inconspicuous ourselves.

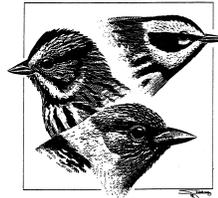
Serenaded by Red-Winged Blackbirds, Song Sparrows and Robins, we heard another signature sound of spring – a winnowing Wilson's Snipe. We watched as it flew way up in the sky, then plummeted, with the wind whistling through its tail feathers as it hurtled towards the earth. You wouldn't think that a bird putting on that kind of showy display would be shy, but when it finally returned to the ground, it scurried to hide behind a clod of dirt, and then disappeared into the brush.

The Mann/Hopper Ponds, just below I-84, provided something for everybody, from veteran bird-watchers to novices, with many species of waterfowl. One stand-out was some American Avocets, already decked out in their spring plumage with brilliant orange heads, and some Black-necked Stilts, in their black-and-white tuxedos and long bright-red legs. Six Greater White-fronted Geese, including one with unusual white markings on its face and crown, also grabbed our attention.

Next we checked out the Umatilla National Wildlife Refuge. The hoped-for Long-Eared Owls were nowhere to be found, but we did see a Cooper's Hawk. After having seen and heard Long-Billed Curlews only from a distance, we finally saw a pair standing in a plowed field, not far from the road. As we watched, one of them apparently vanished, then we located it again just a few

feet away where it had hunkered down on the ground, blending right into the background.

At McCormack Slough, we saw ducks galore! Still-wintering Buffleheads, Ring-necked Ducks, and Common Goldeneyes swam among recently-arrived Cinnamon Teal and a Ruddy Duck, among others. Many people in our group had not known each other, but trying to get a good look at these ducks became a group effort, with people sharing their scopes and helping each other spot the elusive ones. Some folks had never seen a Ruddy Duck in full breeding plumage, and it evoked comments such as, "Wow!" and, "I thought you were kidding about the blue bill!" To see if any of the secretive Virginia Rails had arrived yet, Craig played a recording of their call and got several responses, although none of them could be lured out of the reeds to show itself.



Our last stop was the McCormack Slough Overlook, where a flock of 11 Long-Billed Curlews flew nearby, letting us see their remarkable silhouettes with those distinctive long curved bills. One of them glided right over us, apparently checking us out too. Finally, on our way out, we spotted an immature Bald Eagle in a tree overlooking the ponds.

Each car returned separately, and we took a detour to McNary Wildlife Park. There, Aaron Skirvin spotted a Red-Necked Grebe. Also, after much deliberation and re-checking with their scopes, Aaron and Dave Herr identified a Western Gull with a broken leg.

So many beautiful birds! Yet, this is just the beginning! Many species, which soon will be abundant, still have not arrived. And we're just beginning to see the brilliant breeding plumages and dramatic mating displays. The birds we saw on this trip bring us the promise of more to come. After all, this was just the first day of spring!

*Contributed by Rebecca Hiers*

### **February - March Bird Sightings**

Birding can be a little slow this time of year, just before the spring rush of migrating birds. There have not been a lot of unusual bird sightings, but still some interesting birds were reported this past month.

On February 16, Connie Betts watched a **Sharp-shinned Hawk** grab a **House Finch** off their covered feeder right in front of her kitchen window. Both the Betts and Jean Woods have reported occasionally seeing the single **Greater Yellowlegs** along McKay Creek at McKay Park. Although not in Umatilla County, Mike and MerryLynn Denny found a **YELLOW-BELLIED SAPSUCKER** at Hood Park in Walla Walla County, near the junction of the Snake and Columbia Rivers. This species is closely related to the **Red-naped** and **Red-breasted Sapsucker**, but is normally found in the eastern United States. The Denny's also located several **Northern Saw-whet Owls** in the park. On February 22 Craig and Judy Corder birded along the old Echo highway between Echo and Pendleton. They noted thousands of **American Robins**, 20 **Killdeer** and 5 **Great Blue Herons** standing on nests at the Echo rookery. The same day Aaron Skirvin and I (Dave Herr) birded around McNary Dam. Our best bird was a **SWAMP SPARROW** we located with a flock of **White-crowned Sparrows** near the Grain elevators above the dam. We also managed to find one **Greater Scaup** and a **Redhead** below the dam as well as three **Herring Gulls** and one adult **Glaucous-winged Gull** along with **Ring-billed** and **California Gulls**. At Cold Springs Reservoir we observed an apparent **Harlan's Red-tailed Hawk**. This is a dark race of Red-tailed Hawk with a white tail. During our travels we also saw large flocks of migrating **American Robins**, but not as many as Craig and Judy reported.

On February 27, Sharon Simons observed an adult **Bald Eagle** near her home between Pendleton and Mission. The next day, Jack Simons reported seeing a **Black-crowned Night-Heron** along the Umatilla River behind their home. The same day I saw a **Merlin** at my home on Mount Hebron. This bird has been using the same telephone pole as a perch for most of the winter. On February 29, Aaron, Jack Simons and I spent the day birding in the grasslands south and west of Pendleton. Although we did not find any **Sage Sparrows** (our target species), it was a lovely day and we did find some neat birds. McKay Reservoir is now open and we checked that out first. In the upper end of the reservoir we found 500 **Mallards**, 100 **Green-winged Teal**, 200 **Northern Pintail**, 100 **American Wigeon** and 20 **Common Mergansers**. There were also 32 **Ring-billed Gulls** and at least one **Herring Gull**. Perhaps the best find of the day was an early **Ferruginous Hawk** along the Coombs Canyon Road. **Horned Larks** were everywhere, and we had a total of 4 **Northern Shrikes** for the trip. We also

noted 2 **Gray Partridge**, 2 **Golden Eagles** and our first **Say's Phoebe** for the season. The same day Neal Hinds found a **EURASIAN WIGEON** in a pond near Stanfield Meadows and the first reported **Turkey Vulture** of the season north of the Powerline Road exit off I-84.

On March 1 I birded around the Holdman area and found three different **Great Horned Owls** sitting on nests. On March 5, Karin Watson reported that a male **Williamson's Sapsucker** was killed when it stuck a window at her Hermiston home. The same day Jack Simons reported three pairs of **Common Goldeneye**, 50 **Green-winged Teal** and a **Bald Eagle** at Mission Ponds. Jack also reported that the **Western Screech-Owls** are again using the nest box has on his property, and he hopes they will raise young again this year. I'm sure Jack will keep us updated on any new developments in his regular newsletter articles. **Western Screech-Owls** are becoming more vocal as breeding season approaches. On March 6, Jane Holmes watched and listened to a pair of **Western Screech-Owls** in the trees at the corner of NW 7<sup>th</sup> and Ellis in Pendleton. Jean Woods also reported hearing **Western Screech-Owls** near her home in Pendleton. On March 6, I birded along Goad Road and heard calling **Northern Flickers** and singing **Morning Doves**, **Bewick's Wrens**, **Western Meadowlarks** and **Red-winged Blackbirds**, a sure sign that spring is near. On March 7, Aaron birded from Pendleton to Ukiah finding a number of interesting birds including **Say's Phoebes**, **Brown Creeper**, **Mountain Bluebirds**, two **Northern Shrikes** and a **Pygmy Nuthatch**. Along with the more common ducks at the Ukiah sewage ponds, he also found a pair of **Tundra Swans** and a **EURASIAN WIGEON**. Along Highway 395 he found **Prairie Falcons** and **Ferruginous Hawks**. Both species appeared to be nesting in the area. The same day I found 2 **Mountain Bluebirds** near Mission. On March 8, Jack Simons spotted a **Pileated Woodpecker** behind his home between Pendleton and Mission. On February 20, Aaron noted two **Great-blue Herons** standing in each of the two nests across the river from the Little League Park. This is the area they nested in last year. On March 7, Paul Daniello found six **Great Blue Herons** in the same area, and he believes there are four nests under construction (see Paul's article on page 3). This would indicate that the Pendleton heronry is expanding, and it will be interesting to monitor the site in the upcoming months. On March 11, Jack Simons reported the first **Yellow-headed Blackbird** of the season sitting in his pasture.

On March 14 a number of Pendleton birders birded in the Echo, McNary and Wanaket areas of the county. Along the Umatilla River between Reith and Echo, migrating **Violet-green Swallows** were noted as well as a single **Rock Wren** and an adult **PEREGRINE FALCON**. **Great Blue Herons** are now using the two heronries along this stretch of the Umatilla River. In the Echo-Stanfield area, five **Long-billed Curlews** were found along with a single **American Avocet** and a **Brown-headed Cowbird**. Approximately 250 **Sandhill Cranes** were also seen circling the area. Over 900 **Greater Scaup** were noted at the grain elevators above the McNary Dam along with a few **Lesser Scaup**. During a short walk through the Wanaket Wildlife area, the group found over 250 **Greater White-fronted Geese** along with 4 **Tundra Swans**, lots of ducks and **Canada Geese**. South of the entrance to Cold Springs Reservoir, 4 **Dunlin** and a **SNOW GOOSE** were seen. The same day Craig Corder found 3 **Greater White-fronted Geese** and a **Cinnamon Teal** along the

Stanfield Meadows Road. On March 16, Jack Simons reported another **Pileated Woodpecker** behind his home and two pairs of **Northern Shovelers** on Mission Ponds.

Remember, the Pendleton Bird Club is keeping a composite list of all the bird species seen in Umatilla County this year. The list is kept on the club's website ([www.pendletonbirders.org](http://www.pendletonbirders.org)) and it's updated every time someone reports a new species for the year. Please send all your spring sightings to me, and we will add any new species to the list. You may contact me (Dave Herr) by e-mail at [dsherr@oregontrail.net](mailto:dsherr@oregontrail.net) or call 276-6413. Check the website often during the spring months to see how the list is progressing.

*Guest Editor for March: Aaron Skirvin*

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## *Pendleton Bird Club*

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