



Kákya Táymut

KUK-yuh TIE-moot, Umatilla Indian Translation: *Bird News*

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Unusual Abundance of Brewer's Sparrow in Umatilla County, 2007

Bird Club members are accustomed to finding some Brewer's Sparrows (*Spizella breweri*) in Umatilla County each year. A few Brewer's are seen each spring as they migrate through the county on their way to breeding areas in Washington and southern British Columbia. In recent years, they have been reported in April and May near Ukiah, along Mud Springs Canyon Road, Echo Meadows, and Wanaket Wildlife Mitigation Area (just west of Hat Rock State Park). Based on the reported sightings, they are few in number but widespread during spring migration in non-forested habitats of central and western Umatilla County.

Historically, they nested in Umatilla County, prior to the elimination of sagebrush habitats that once dominated the northwestern portion of the county. It's possible (or even probable) that some Brewer's Sparrow continue to nest in the sagebrush habitat on the Umatilla Chemical Depot a few miles west of Hermiston. However, since the public is not allowed on the Depot lands, we don't know for sure whether they continue to nest there.

Although some Brewer's Sparrows are observed locally each spring, more are seen annually during their fall migration from

late August through early September. As in the spring, they are in open country (grasslands primarily), and Gurdane Road, south of Vinson, is a great place to look for them as they move southward after the breeding season. They are often mixed in with migrating Chipping Sparrows (a close relative), Savannah Sparrows, and Vesper Sparrows, so identification can be a little challenging.



Brewer's Sparrow by
Mike Danzenbaker.

We are not accustomed to finding Brewer's Sparrows locally during the breeding season. However, on June 3, 2007, June Whitten, Alison Havens, and I found at least six male Brewer's Sparrows on Bald Mountain, which is located on the Umatilla-Union County line about three miles northeast of Langdon Lake. We knew they were males because they were singing their distinctive song. A male Brewer's song is composed of a continuous

series of trills at different pitches. While the songs of most songbirds last 0.5 to 1.5 seconds, male Brewer's Sparrows sing a long song that lasts up to 10 or more seconds. Also, just to confuse matters, they sometimes sing a shorter song, a series of 3 or 4 trills in succession that lasts a second or two.

As the breeding season moved through June and into July this year, more reports of Brewer's Sparrows filtered in. They were seen and heard



by Jenny Barnett on Telephone Ridge and Gibbon Ridge, about 20 miles east of Pendleton. Singing Brewer's were reported from Bald Mountain (second sighting), McDougal Road (near Tollgate), USFS Roads #52 and #55 (southeast of Ukiah), Yellow Jacket Road (south of Pilot Rock), "stock drive" road (a few miles southwest of Nye Junction), Adams Road (along Wildhorse Creek between Pendleton and Adams), and Summit Road (several miles northeast of Meacham). While birding along Yellow Jacket Road on July 1, June Whitten and I saw a pair of adult Brewer's Sparrows carrying insects in their beaks, a sure sign they were feeding young. And on July 22, I saw at least three juvenile Brewer's Sparrows (they have streaks on the breast) and a few adults at three locations along USFS Road #52: near Ukiah and Pearson Guard Station.

None of these locations has big sagebrush, which is the primary nesting habitat of Brewer's Sparrows. Sites such as Bald Mountain and Gibbon Ridge have some low sagebrush, but all of the other locations are grasslands; 10-year old burned forest; dry, rocky and grassy balds or south-facing slopes; or open clear cuts in forested areas of the Blue Mountains, with or without shrubs.

This widespread influx of Brewer's Sparrows into Umatilla County during the breeding season has not been reported in previous years. The causes of the 2007 invasion of Brewer's Sparrow is not known; although one theory holds that the droughty conditions in the Great Basin (especially Nevada) have forced the sparrows to search for suitable nesting habitat farther north. Coincidentally, there has been an influx of breeding Black-throated Sparrows (*Amphispiza bilineata*) in north-central Oregon and the lower Columbia Basin of Washington this spring. This is another species that often uses sagebrush as its primary breeding habitat, particularly in the northern part of its breeding range. We have not received reports of Black-throated Sparrows in Umatilla County this spring.

This year's breeding season is rapidly winding down. But, it's still possible to find Brewer's Sparrows in Umatilla County at the locations noted above. We know some pairs successfully nested in Umatilla County this year, and at sites that do not provide their typical sagebrush habitat.

Will Brewer's Sparrow become a regular breeding species in Umatilla County in the future? Or was the influx of sparrows in 2007 just a one-time phenomenon? Only time will tell. And to find the answer, put Brewer's Sparrow on your list of birds to search for in Umatilla County next spring.

Contributed by Aaron Skirvin

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Bird Club Picnic

Saturday, September 22, 2007

Shorebirding at Cold Springs NWR

followed by

Picnic at McNary Wildlife Area

**Meet at the Pendleton Safeway parking lot,
NE corner at 9:00 a.m.**

Bird Club Meeting

7:00 p.m., October 11, 2007

"Birds of Malheur NWR"

By Terry Steele

**Pendleton First Presbyterian Church
201 SW Dorion Ave., Pendleton**



The Big Sit! Bird Count

Sunday, October 14, 2007

Enjoy a few hours or more of relaxed bird counting near McNary Dam at Umatilla or Cold Springs NWR, east of Hermiston. The Pendleton Bird Club will participate again this year in the Big Sit! Bird Count, so put October 14 on your calendar! Want to participate? We hope so!

For further information, contact June Whitten: 276-9019

Bird Club Meeting

7:00 p.m., November 8, 2007

Program to be announced.

**Pendleton First Christian Church
N. Main Street, Pendleton**

BIRD OF THE MONTH —

STELLER'S JAY (*Cyanocitta stelleri*)

Steller's Jays are handsome birds with their deep blue bodies merging into black on their heads and crests. They are usually aggressive and will win a position at the bird feeder over most other birds, including their eastern relative, the Blue Jay. These two jay species, both about 11 inches in length, are the only crested jays in the United States. While Blue Jays have occurred in Umatilla County, they are considered an eastern to mid-western bird that is possibly expanding its range into the western U.S.

Steller's Jays eat a variety of foods, including nuts, berries, seeds and insects. They are also happy to receive handouts from campers and picnickers. They do not migrate, but may move to lower elevations in severe weather. Their wintering patterns vary, arriving at local bird feeders some years, and possibly not returning other years. They enjoy peanuts

and sunflower seeds from feeders, while their main food supply in winter is seeds from cones. Steller's Jays live in conifer forests, but not in dense forest. They require some open space and may forage on the ground as well as in the trees. They are most often seen in small groups.

Jays are clever birds and are adept at stealing food from other birds. Where Acorn Woodpeckers have carefully stashed their winter supply of acorns, the jays often get to them first. Even though they may harass other birds, one has to admire their "rock-star" attitude. With the ability to make a wide range of calls, they often imitate a Red-tailed Hawk and cause smaller birds to scurry for cover. You guessed it! While the small birds are cowering in safety, the jays are thoroughly enjoying the food they left behind.

The nest, a bulky foundation of twigs and leaves cemented with mud and lined with pine needles and grass, is usually in a conifer, but may be in a hollow deciduous tree. Two to six pale greenish-blue eggs with brown flecks are laid and incubated by the female for approximately 18 days. The male does defend the nest territory and may help with feeding the female and babies.

Steller's Jays are named for Georg Wilhelm Steller, a German naturalist and explorer. He participated in Vitus Bering's expedition to Alaska in 1740 – 42. In addition to the Steller's Jay, an eider, a sea cow, a sea lion, and an eagle bear his name. Occasionally, the form "Stellar" or "Stellar's" is used, but is incorrect.



Steller's Jay by
Kathleen McKeehen

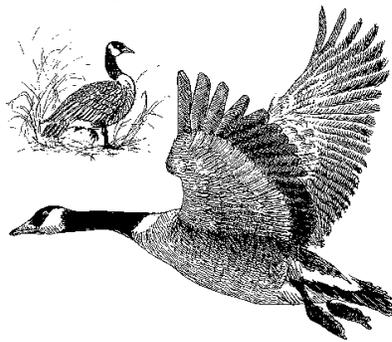


Steller's Jays are fairly common and often seen in the Blue Mountains of Umatilla County. Some of their favorite hang-outs include Battle Mountain State Park, Ukiah-Dale Wayside, Emigrant Springs State Park, Langdon Lake, and most of the forested areas in the county. These locations are probably favored because they have fairly open timbered areas without the dense underbrush of other areas.

Contributed by June Whitten

LUCKY GOES HOME

From The Editor: Terry Johnson, Tribal liaison officer with the National Resources Conservation Service, called Aaron Skirvin during the first week of May to ask if he knew anyone who might be able to raise an orphaned gosling that had wandered into his yard. Terry said he spotted the gosling fending itself from a cat that was about to create havoc. Aaron soon called me and I of course said, "Sure, we can raise that bird!" knowing my wife Sharon would likely do all of the heavy lifting. Seventy days later, I'm pleased to report that Lucky has matured into a genuine flying goose with a mind of her own. With mixed feelings we released Lucky on Saturday, July 22, hopefully, to do what she was born to do — be a goose!



maybe her namesake would be her salvation for years to come. I had to take her down the long trail to the water's edge — about ¼ mile — but she flew / waddled behind me. We apparently got there at the right time as 4 or 5 flocks of geese took off to the wheat fields and flew both in front and over us giving Lucky some idea of what her destiny might be. She called and called her little heart out as these flocks flew past. Finally, she was the only goose around that I could see. She seemed to be pretty intimidated by everything and wouldn't even go in the water. I figured I was about to strike out for the third time as the only cover for me to hide / evade her was 200 yards to our south. With no other options I headed off that way thinking I might get her to duck her head under water while I hid behind the willows.

She did fly out into the reservoir about 100 yards as I made my way to the willows though. Just at that moment a young couple on the other side of the water showed up with lounge chairs for a picnic along the edge of the

embankment. Lucky spotted them and immediately swam more than 100 yards to see what was going on. I took that as the sign I needed, so sneaked back into the brush. Meanwhile, Lucky apparently decided the new comers looked familiar so clambered/ flew/hopped up the vertical embankment to their location.

I didn't have my bins with me but you could tell the gal was aghast at the thought of this wild creature with a 5 foot wingspan clambering up the bank in what appeared to be full attack mode! She was leaning waaaay back away from the approaching creature in her lounge chair. The guy, however, took it in stride and reached down for something, then stretched his hand out and offered it to Lucky — probably a hot dog or a cold beer. Lucky took whatever it was and my heart sank!!! This association with humans was a major red flag, especially in a hunting zone.



Well, the time finally came to release Lucky the Goose to the wild, if you can call McKay Reservoir "the wild".

It was time though. She was showing no desire to take off on her own — in fact, after our first two failed attempts to release her at Mission Ponds, she refused to even follow me to the dike road knowing that "something" was going to happen. So I herded her into the dog's kennel, wrapped the kennel in a blanket and off we went to the east side of the reservoir where I heard lots of goose chatter. Having raised Lucky as an orphaned gosling, my wife and I had reservations about releasing her but knew in our heart that it was the right thing to do. Besides,



So, with nothing more to do I walked back up the trail toward the truck, occasionally looking back to see if Lucky was still there. Eventually I was too far off to see her but could see the couple had laid back down on their chairs. Meanwhile two small flocks of geese had landed in the exact location where we had originally intersected the shoreline. Likely, these were family units.

When I was within 100 yards of the truck I heard a lone goose calling in the same pitch that Lucky uses. I turned and saw a lone goose flying over the water, turn and land directly between the two flocks. This bird turned and walked over to the smaller flock but was chased away by a larger bird, then turned and walked over to the other flock but was met with the same treatment. I am about 95 percent certain that this lone bird was Lucky the Goose but will never know for sure.

I like to think she will eventually make friends and be accepted into a flock. At the least I think she will follow them to the feeding grounds — wheat fields within a mile of the water. I don't know much about goose behavior but they are gregarious birds and should allow other birds to mingle within a flock.

Since some of the McKay flocks visit Mission Ponds during the fall / winter period it would not surprise me one day to see a lone female goose swing over that pond, recognize her surroundings then head over to the red house with the white barn and wait for some humans to come out to feed the horses so she could eat the left over grain. With the "Guns of Death" only 75 days away, I hope she learns quickly from her wild cousins to avoid people.

I won't be shooting any geese this year.

Post Script: Terry updated me a moment ago to say that a second gosling had been captured near his home after he gave us Lucky. This bird was given to Lynn Tompkins, owner of Blue Mountain Wildlife, who successfully introduced the gosling onto a friend's pond which had a brood of geese. Turns out, geese will readily

adopt other goslings if they are raising a brood. Nice to know...

Contributed by Jack Simons

VISIT THE BIRD CLUB'S WEBSITE

Bird checklists, ID Challenge, Club Member's Photo Gallery, Newsletter Archive and more.

www.pendletonbirders.org

JUNE – JULY BIRD SIGHTINGS

For birders, summer brings a slow-down in new bird sightings. The migrants have moved on, settling on their breeding grounds farther north. Local breeders get busy with bird parenting chores, and become quieter as they stop trying to intimidate competitors and attract mates, and start the hard work of foraging for mates and youngsters. To make new bird sightings even slimmer for our club, our "A Team" spent half the month in Canada. Although June and Duane Whitten, Aaron Skirvin and Russ and Connie Betts saw lots of great birds, they didn't provide much material for me to work with this month. Regardless, here's a summary of significant bird sightings.

While birding for pay, Jenny Barnett found singing male **Brewer's Sparrows** along bird survey routes on Telephone and Gibbon Ridges, on the Umatilla Reservation. Brewer's sparrows are showing up in unusual places this summer.

On June 29, June Whitten went shorebirding at McKay Reservoir, and turned up the first **Western Sandpipers** of the year. She also spotted 9 **American Avocets** and 6 **Western Grebes**. On July 7, June, sharp-eyed as ever, picked a **Least Sandpiper** out of a flock of 40 **Western Sandpipers** at McKay Reservoir.

Jack Simons reported a flock of 173 **American White Pelicans** at Mission Ponds on July 1. Russ and Connie Betts reported a family of **Black-chinned Hummingbirds** at their house, and 4 **Common Nighthawks** on July 19.



And that, Pendleton Birders, wraps up the bird sightings for June-July (I warned you it was

slim). Don't despair, however, fall migration is closer than you think. Shorebirds are already on the move through Umatilla County, heading to their wintering grounds.

WEBSITE UPDATE

There will be a slight delay in publishing this issue of the Newsletter on our website this month. The battery in my laptop computer decided to crash and burn (figuratively speaking) leaving me with no way to



operate the computer nor access our website. A new battery was ordered yesterday (Tuesday) and should arrive by the end of the week (if you can believe the shipping notice). I will publish the Newsletter as soon as my battery arrives so please be patient....thanks!

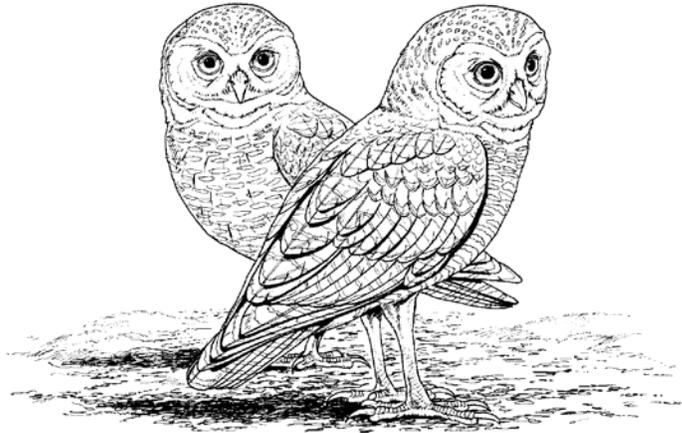
Jack

Newsletter Editor: Position Vacant

Editor for July : Jack Simons

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