

# The Magpiper

## Monthly Calendar

### Thursday, January 9

Board Meeting  
7:00 p.m.

### Thursday, January 16

Membership Meeting  
7:00 p.m.  
Whitman College

### Saturday, January 18

Field Trip 9  
9:00 a.m.  
Harper Joy Theatre Parking lot

**President:** Mike Denny  
**Vice President:** Jim Parrish  
**Secretary:** Paul and Judy Treman  
**Treasurer:** Jonathan Webster  
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**Field Trips:** Paul Treman  
**Magpiper Editor:** Ginger Shoemake  
**Member at Large:** Shirley Muse  
**Bird Sightings:** Ginger Shoemake

## Website:

<http://www.blumtn.org>

## Bird sightings:

[house\\_wren@charter.net](mailto:house_wren@charter.net)

## Contact BMAS:

[house\\_wren@charter.net](mailto:house_wren@charter.net) or  
PO Box 1106  
Walla Walla, WA 99362

## Meeting

### Membership Meeting: January 16, 7:00 p.m.

Room 151 Hall of Science, Whitman College

### PROGRAM: BOOKS AND BIRDS

Tom Scribner will once again be our host/comedian for the January meeting sharing interesting bird facts and introduce our speakers:

Here are the books that will be reviewed and the individuals giving the report:

*Where the Sea Breaks its Back* by Corey Ford

Presenter: George Jameson

*Eating Stone* by Ellen Meloy

Presenter: Nancy Mitchell

*Rare bird: Pursuing the Mystery of the Marbled Murrelet* by Maria Mudd Ruth

Presenter: Sue Parrish

*One River* by Wade Davis

Presenter: Chris Howard

As in the past years, David from Earthlight Books will have a large number of books on birds and the natural environment for sale. Come early and peruse his selections.

## Field Trip

### BACKYARD FEEDERS

### Saturday: January 18—9:00 a.m.

Backyard bird feeding can be very enjoyable, and is a good way to get to know the birds in our area. In the winter, when food from natural sources is not available, birds rely on feeders to survive. Ginger Shoemake will take us to several backyards to look at different ways to attract birds to feeders. We will see a variety of habitats and feeding stations.

This will be a half-day trip. We will visit several yards so plan to carpool. Please let Ginger know if you want to attend. 525-2963 or [house\\_wren@charter.net](mailto:house_wren@charter.net)



## *Tom's Tales by Tom Scribner*

### THESE RESOLUTIONS ARE FOR THE BIRDS

As you know from a prior column, I do not do joy. I have tried. Really I have. But joy is just not in me. Also on the long list of things I do not do are resolutions. As in, I do not make any new years' resolutions. And for several reasons.

First, what is a resolution other than a recognition of a fault, a weakness, an area needing improvement? People make new year's resolutions to exercise more because they realize they do not exercise enough. People make new year's resolutions to lose weight because they are overweight. People make new year's resolutions to be nicer to their family members because they are not nice. I do not need to make a list of areas where I need improvement. Not because there are not many; but because, in depressing point of fact, there are too many! Do you have any idea what a downer it is to make a list of all the areas where you need to improve? I did it once and by the time I was done my list was almost as long as "War and Peace."

Second, I know that I will not stay on task for more than a week or so. Believe me, years ago, when I tried this new year's resolutions self-improvement stuff, the longest I stayed with any resolution was eleven days! Eleven days of trying to help my wife more around the house and I was done. Back to my slovenly, non-helpful ways. No, I don't do resolutions.

But I know that some folks do. Some, in fact, take this new year's resolutions stuff very seriously. Which got me thinking. I wondered if any BMAS folks made resolutions and, if they do, they have anything to do with birds or birding. So I made inquiry. I asked a random collection of BMASers if they had made any resolutions involving birding. Some had. And those that had not, I asked, if they did, what they would be. Herewith are the resolutions of some BMAS members. What I found very, very revealing is what each resolution tells us about the level of skill of the person who made it. So as not to embarrass anyone I did not use names. Still, I bet you can figure out who a lot of the resolution makers are.

1. I resolve to be able to positively identify a flicker.
2. I resolve to be able to tell a robin from a varied thrush. (Okay, so this is mine. Or would be if I made one. Still, it's a start.)

3. I resolve to be able to tell a lesser yellowlegs from a greater yellowlegs. As for "peeps," forgetaboutit!
4. I resolve not to call them seagulls and to be able to positively identify, and not confuse, California gulls, ring-billed gulls, and mew gulls.
5. I resolve to be able to identify brewer's sparrows and grasshopper sparrows - - by their songs! (Go for it, Ginger.)
6. I resolve to learn how to spell E-M-P-I-D-O-N-A-X and to be able to list at least six species in this genus. Not identify them, that will be next year; just list them!
7. I resolve to be able to distinguish a Hammond's flycatcher from a dusky flycatcher from a gray flycatcher. (See #6 above. The person who made this resolution is one year ahead of whoever made resolution #6.)
8. I resolve to be able to identify at least nine warbler species found in eastern Washington by their songs. While blindfolded! (Like being blindfolded is, what, gonna make you hear better?)
9. I resolve to learn the Latin names of at least 300 of the 337 species that have been seen in Walla Walla County. As soon as I see that many. I am at 292. (Gee, I wonder who this could be?)
10. I resolve to find, in Walla Walla County, at least three species of birds that have never been seen before in Walla Walla County. (And we all know who this is, don't we?)

I tried to arrange the resolutions in order of increasing skill and birding sophistication. You can place yourself on the scale, 1 to 10, based on your subjective assessment of your birding abilities. I somewhere between 3 and 4. On a good day.

## *The World Around Us*

### **What Chickadees Have That I Want. Badly**

by Robert Krulwich/NPR, *December 23, 2013*

First I look in my right coat pocket. Nothing. Then my left. Nothing. Then my pants, right side — no. Then my pants, left side — yes! This is me at my front door, looking for my keys. Every day.

I have this extraordinary ability to *not* remember where my keys are. It's uncanny. Every morning, I lock the front door, step away, fall into a 2 ½ second trance during which I place my keys in lord-knows-which pocket, *even if a second earlier I was saying to myself, "OK, remember where you put your keys."* But I don't. Which is why, around this time of year, I envy chickadees. They've solved this problem.

You know these birds. Here in the Northeast, they are everywhere, and they stick around during the winter. The "black-capped" ones are most familiar, with two-tone heads that make them look like masked bank robbers. The thing about them is that in the late fall, they have an enormous amount of remembering to do.

Starting in October, they are busy flying around their territory — which can cover about 10 square miles — gathering seeds from fruiting bushes and trees, and then caching them, storing them, in hundreds and hundreds of hiding places. So if you're a chickadee you have to remember (I've marked the spots in red)

that you left seeds on the upper-left window sill of a particular house, also on the upside of that house's chimney, also between twigs two and three on the tree on the right side of that house, and on and on, creating a list so long (especially compared to my own paltry four pockets) that it would make my head explode.



Which is, by the way, what happens to chickadees' heads. They (almost literally) explode. Every fall.

### **Birds With Elastic Brains**

According to professor Diane Lee at Cal State University, Long Beach, every fall the part of the chickadee's brain responsible for remembering where things are expands in volume by approximately 30 percent, stays big during the winter, and then shrinks back in the spring.

**Let me say that again: They grow more brain when they need to remember things; then shrink that brain when the "remembering" season ends.**



Diane says that while the overall size of the brain might grow a little, the real change is in the number of neurons, or brain cells. When the bird thinks, "OK, I've just put some sunflower seeds under this brick," new brain cells (and new connections between those cells) spring into being and become a memory. If you count the cells in a chickadee brain before the fall, and then count them after, Diane wrote me, "the number of neurons *definitely* goes up in the hippocampus, and a number of us have confirmed that (including my lab)."

### **What Seed? What Brick?**

After winter is over, the bird will erase those connections, and all memory of the sunflower-seed-under-the-brick disappears. Sort of like your memory of the room you stayed in at the Days Inn four months ago. If don't use it, you lose it. But in the chickadee's case, the brain itself, its cellular count, shrinks. Thirty percent is a lot of shrinkage. (Or, as winter comes on, a lot of *extra* capacity.)

So these birds have, in effect, elastic brains. Only certain birds have this ability (some to cache food in the fall; some, like the canary, to learn songs in the spring.)

Twenty years ago, this was an astonishing notion. When neuroscientist Fernando Nottebohm cell growth in chickadees back in 1994, brain scientists thought, "This can't be." They believed that animals didn't add brain cells once they became adults, that a mature brain stays the same. But we now know that's not true — not true of us, and not true of chickadees.

But, while humans can also grow new brain cells in adulthood, it seems to me, especially when I'm standing at my door every evening searching pockets, that we could grow a few more.

To be blunt: I want what the chickadee's got.

**Please.**

## Walla Walla 2013 CBC Results

**Total Species** 79  
**Total individual birds** 14,413  
**Observers** 34  
**Weather** 40-45 degrees  
**Overcast**

Snow goose	1
Cackling goose	1
Canada goose	1,223
Wood duck	15
American wigeon	218
Mallard	1,109
Green-winged teal	4
Ring-necked duck	2
Common goldeneye	1
Hooded merganser	37
Common merganser	29
Gray partridge	32
Ring-necked pheasant	63
Ruffed grouse	6
Wild turkey	200
California quail	429
Great blue heron	14
Bald eagle	3
Northern harrier	18
Sharp-shinned hawk	13
Cooper's hawk	7
Red-tailed hawk	123
Rough-legged hawk	12
Golden eagle	2
American kestrel	81
Merlin	5
Prairie falcon	1
Killdeer	3
Wilson's snipe	1
Ring-billed gull	1
Rock pigeon	342
Eurasian collared dove	195
Mourning dove	109
Western screech owl	cw
Barn owl	cw
Great horned owl	11
Northern pygmy owl	1
Long-eared owl	1
Anna's hummingbird	1
Belted kingfisher	7
Downy woodpecker	43
Hairy woodpecker	14
Northern flicker	283
Pileated woodpecker	1
Northern shrike	9
Steller's jay	22

Black-billed magpie	404
American crow	328
Common raven	154
Black-capped chickadee	171
Mountain chickadee	8
Red-breasted nuthatch	12
Brown creeper	1
Bewick's wren	38
Pacific wren	8
American dipper	5
Golden-crowned kinglet	18
Ruby-crowned kinglet	20
Townsend's solitaire	19
Hermit thrush	6
American robin	1,688
Varied thrush	13
European starling	2,914
Bohemian waxwing	402
Cedar waxwing	621
Yellow-rumped warbler	2
Spotted towhee	4
Fox sparrow	4
Song sparrow	207
White-throated sparrow	6
White-crowned sparrow	65
Dark-eyed junco	1,446
Red-winged blackbird	30
Brewer's blackbird	2
House finch	289
Red crossbill	16
Pine siskin	1
American goldfinch	211
House sparrow	605



**Pygmy owl** photographed by Jim Parrish on Christmas Bird Count

## Events

### CENTER AT THE PARK BIRD TALK

On December 9, George Jameson, Paul and Judy Treman and Rodger and Ginger Shoemake met with the Adult Care group at the Senior Center to talk about



birds. Slides and videos of common birds in the Walla Walla area were shown and discussed. A question and answer session followed about feeding birds and other topics. A fun time was had by all.

### MARK YOUR CALENDAR!

**17<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL  
GREAT BACKYARD BIRD COUNT**

Counting birds is a fun, free, family-friendly way to discover and help the birds in your community.

Visit [birdcount.org](http://birdcount.org) to learn more. February 14-17, 2014

Illustration: Robin by Scott GBC/Barbara Dean Starnet

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## Musings by Chris Howard

### SOLSTICE

In this modern age of cell phones, computers and TVs it is easy for us to neglect our connection with our natural surroundings as



we live warmly in our heated houses and drive around in our sealed metal containers. One of my favorite ways of connection with our always changing natural world, is through observation of the summer and winter solstices, our longest and shortest days of the year. Solstice comes from the Latin word: solstitium referring to when the sun stands still. Throughout the ages, humans have observed the sun as it slowly moves up and down the horizon in conjunction with the changes in the length of day and the seasons. The Mayan and Incan cultures constructed elaborate stone temples with observatories for the priests to track the movement of the sun and moon to be able to advise the people on the best time to plant their life sustaining crops.

It occurred to me that there was no reason why we shouldn't have a solar observation point to mark the solstice on a local basis. So on December 24<sup>th</sup>, the first clear morning after solstice on the 21<sup>st</sup>, my two daughters and I awoke in the soft pre-dawn light, dressed in warm clothes and headed out into the frosty morning on a quest to mark the solar movement as the Incas of old had done. We drove to Bennington Lake carrying a red plastic tent stake and a hammer. Hiking down the path from the parking lot we stopped on the frozen mud stream arm of the lake and each picked up a good sized rock. We then quietly followed the trail through the early morning stillness, between the leafless cottonwood trees, out onto the grassy slope of the highest hill overlooking the lake. At the top of the hill a covered picnic table became our "ancient" solar observation point as we patiently waited in the chilly winter wind for the sun to emerge from behind the eastern mountains. Ducks circled the frozen lake looking for a landing spot, then a large raptor slowly glided by as the first rays of sun quickly turned the surrounding grasses to bright yellow. I hammered in the stake in line with the winter solstice and we piled the rocks on top to mark the spot. Our plan is to return to the same perfect place to mark the equinoxes and the summer solstice as our way of maintaining connection with the natural cycles of this beautiful planet.

## *In the Field...by Ginger Shoemake*

Cold winter weather arrived Thanksgiving week. I hope you all have plenty of food and water out for the birds.

Jonathan and Melissa Webster had a spotted towhee visit their yard everyday for at least a week starting November 25.

We were surprised to see the Anna's hummingbird still at Bennington Lake on our Tuesday walk on November 26. The sugar water in the feeder was mostly frozen, but there was a little bit at the bottom that was not, and that must be what it was drinking.

On November 29, Mike and MerryLynn drove up Jasper Mountain with her family and found some nice birds—pileated woodpecker, rough-legged hawks, red-tailed hawks and a golden eagle.

Carolyn Corvino saw a wild turkey November 29 while out walking near the north end of North Division. It was dancing around in a yard, and she felt it was laughing because it was still able to dance the day after Thanksgiving.

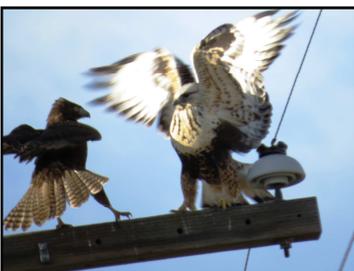
I watched about 60 cedar waxwing devour the berries on our juniper tree on November 30.

Two ring-necked ducks and a hooded merganser joined many mallards at Lynn Sealey's pond on Kendall Road on December 1.

Nina Conn enjoyed watching a downy woodpecker in the pine trees outside her window on December 3.

On December 3, Melissa Cummins watched a northern goshawk in the field below her house in Touchet.

We had a lesser goldfinch visit our feeder briefly on a cold December 5 morning. Other interesting birds seen included 31 cedar waxwings, 15 Eurasian collared doves a pine siskin, about 70 dark-eyed juncos and two sharp-shinned hawks.



Rodger Shoemake and George Jameson drove south of Lowden on December 5 to photograph raptors. They found many red-tailed hawks and rough-legged hawks including a standoff between the two species that Rodger was able to capture. The red-tail won the dispute.

Pam Fisher's Anna's hummingbird came to the feeder for a long drink on December 6. She was very happy to see it was still alive in the bitter cold weather. I had two more people report the next day that hummingbirds were still coming to their feeders.

The ponds on South Wilbur were full of waterfowl on December 7. There were more than 30 wood ducks and as many mallards and American wigeons. One lone ring-necked duck was with the mallards.

Paul Treman took this great photo of a merlin on the Pre-Christmas Count Field Trip that was held December 8. Seven people braved the cold to tour parts of the CBC route. Highlights besides the merlin were two bald eagles, three great horned owls, wood ducks and a large number of California quail. 31 species were seen.



December 14 was the 40th annual Walla Walla Christmas Bird Count. The weather warmed up into the 40's making for a pleasant day to count birds in the 15 mile circle. The group met at the Harper Joy Theatre parking lot at 7:30 a.m. for instructions from Mike Denny and set out for a day of counting birds. We reconvened at 5:00 at Rodger and Ginger Shoemake's home for supper and a wrap-up of the day's events. A big thank you goes out to MerryLynn Denny for all of her hard work organizing the count. Planning routes, creating maps, assigning observers — all that takes a great deal of time and effort and we all appreciate her dedication to making the count successful. (A list of the birds seen can be found on Page 4)



On December 17, the Tuesday walkers at Bennington Lake found 72 Bohemian waxwings in with cedar waxwings and other species usually seen on their walk.

George and Deanna Jameson helped Rodger and me on our Milton-Freewater area Raptor Route on December 17. We had fog most of the day and ran out of time before the route was complete so we finished up on the 19th. The big surprise was finding 3 merlins. We also saw 119 red-tailed hawks, 68 American kestrels, 9 northern harriers, 1 adult bald eagle, 3 rough-legged hawks, 2 prairie falcons, 1 sharp-shinned hawk and 6 great horned owls.

Melissa Webster saw a pair of common goldeneye while walking Mill Creek on December 18. She also saw several hooded mergansers and common mergansers along the creek.

Nancy Mitchell walked Mill Creek and Bennington Lake on December 21. There was a nice variety of waterfowl on the creek along with 3 great blue herons and a belted kingfisher. Along the upper trail at Bennington, she found 5 red-tailed hawks, 3 rough-legged hawks, 3 northern harriers, a sharp-shinned hawk and a northern shrike.

Sue and Jim Parrish found two very vocal bald eagles at Hood Park while birding there on December 22.



On December 26 they saw a northern saw-whet owl in western Walla Walla County and a snowy owl near Finley. Great photos Jim!

The Tuesday walkers had good luck finding owls on December 24. They saw a long-eared owl, a barn owl and a great horned owl. The lake was frozen so there was no waterfowl, and the birds were pretty quiet in spite of the sunshine.

Pam Fisher had a yard full of birds on December 26—song sparrows, black-capped chickadees, red-breasted nuthatches, juncos and finches. A great blue

heron and a belted kingfisher visit often trying to get to the fish in her pond (which she has netted).

George Jameson escaped the fog on December 26 by driving up South Fork Russell Creek Road where he photographed these cedar waxwings basking in the sunshine.



On December 26, Mike and MerryLynn chummed for gulls at Ice Harbor Dam. Along with the regulars they found a Thayer's gull and a western gull. The poop piles were loaded with gulls and blackbirds including 2 mew gulls and a yellow-headed blackbird. At the Walla Walla River Delta they found 20 dunlin and a glaucous gull.

Mike and MerryLynn hiked up Mormon Grade on December 27 to escape the fog. They found some nice birds including a Say's phoebe, pygmy owl, bald eagle and Pacific wren.

On December 29, MerryLynn found 163 bohemian waxwings, a golden eagle and a bald eagle on North Fork Coppei Creek Road.

January 1 starts a new year for counting birds in Walla Walla County. The final number of species seen in 2013 was 251. MerryLynn Denny keeps the county list up to date on the website, so check the link and let her know if you have birds to add to the 2014 list throughout the year. You can email her with your additions at [m.denny@charter.net](mailto:m.denny@charter.net)

And don't forget to let me know what you are seeing during the month so I can include your findings in the "In the Field" section of the Magpiper. Email me at [house\\_wren@charter.net](mailto:house_wren@charter.net).

**HAPPY NEW YEAR!**

**LOOK FOR BLUE MOUNTAIN AUDUBON  
ON  
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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 7:00 p.m. in the Whitman College Science Building. A newsletter, **The Magpiper** is published September through May 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 [www.blumtn.org](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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