

Blue Mountain Audubon Society

The Magpiper

December, 2015

Monthly Calendar

No Board Meeting this month

Saturday, Dec. 12 - 8:00 a.m.
Field Trip
Harper Joy Theatre Parking lot

Saturday, Dec. 19—7:30 a.m.
CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT
Harper Joy Theatre Parking Lot

President: George Jameson
Vice President: Jeff Fredson
Secretary: Paul and Judy Treman
Treasurer: Jonathan Webster
Conservation: Chris Howard
Education: Kathy McConnell
Membership: Melissa Webster and Holly Howard
Programs: Nancy Mitchell
Publicity: Jonathan Webster
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Bluebird Trails: Tom Scribner
Adopt a Highway: Mike James, Joanne Hesser-James, Jill Hesser-Gardiner
Webmaster: George Jameson
Facebook Admin: Judy Treman
Field Trips: Paul Treman
Magpiper Editor: Ginger Shoemake
Members at Large: Mike Denny, Shirley Muse, Priscilla Dauble
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Walla Walla, WA 99362

2015 Christmas Bird Count—December 19

The 42nd annual Walla Walla Christmas Bird Count will be Saturday, December 19. Meet at the Harper Joy Theater parking lot at 7:30 a.m. for orientation. Our CBC circle is centered at Bennington Lake and is 15 miles across – that's a lot of ground to cover! It is broken up into 12 areas – some areas require a lot of walking – others can be birded from the car. Areas up in the foothills may require 4 wheel drive vehicle and/or lots of walking in the snow.

If you cannot come out for the day you can still contribute by counting birds at your feeder (if you live within 7.5 miles of Bennington Lake). All bird species AND numbers are counted.

There will be a wrap-up get together at 5 p.m. at Nancy Mitchell's home at 63 Wolf Fork Place. Hot soup, bread and drink provided. You do NOT have to come on the count to join in the wrap-up – and you are welcome to bring your favorite salad and/or dessert.

Please contact MerryLynn Denny m.denny@charter.net or **529-0080** if you plan on participating – so she can assign folks to areas and organize the count. If you cannot come to the wrap-up please send your bird count to MerryLynn.

Field Trip

PRE-CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

Saturday, December 12 – 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon

Mike Denny will lead a fun field trip to scope out several areas within the Christmas Bird Count circle. We will look for both common and special winter birds. This field trip will be an excellent opportunity for everyone to learn more about how and where the Christmas Bird Count is conducted. Bring your binoculars and a friend or two.

We will meet at the Harper Joy Theater parking lot and will carpool. Please let Mike know if you plan to attend. m.denny@charter.net or **529-0080**.



Meet the Board

NANCY MITCHELL: PROGRAM CHAIR



My interest in birds started with a Christmas gift.

When my eldest son, Aaron, was 5-years-old, my sister sent him a National Geographic Pocket Guide to Birds and a bird feeder for a Christmas present. We spent hours looking through the pocket guide

memorizing the birds, talking about their feet, their beaks, what they ate and where they lived. And the rest, they say, is history.

Several years later when I became a single parent and had two active boys to raise, I was looking for things to do outdoors and for low or no cost. We became regulars walking along the Mill Creek recreation trail and hiking at Bennington Lake—and looking for birds.

When the boys were still small, and interested, I would bring them to Audubon meetings but as they grew, they had better things to do than to spend time with mom looking for birds. Thankfully, those early days of birding piqued their interest and today it is not unusual for me to receive a text about a recent sighting.

I began working in the Whitman College Alumni Office in 1985 and today I serve as the director. It is the responsibility for those of us who work in the Office to keep alumni and current parents connected to the College; this work is directly tied to the fund-raising effort.

I routinely organize events across the country, taking faculty on the road to speak to our constituents, oversee the reunion program, as well as a weekend-long Summer College session and our domestic and international travel program. I have been fortunate to travel with Whitman alumni to Egypt, Jordan, Norway, England, Cuba and the Galapagos Islands. Though these excursions were not focused on bird watching, I have managed to see birds on the fly, wherever and whenever.

Organizing speakers for Blue Mountain Audubon Society is nearly identical to the work I do on a daily basis, but it is your program ideas that have helped make the task easy – keep those great ideas coming! You can email me at mitchenl@whitman.edu.

Events

PROJECT FEEDER WATCH



Project FeederWatch is a winter-long survey of birds that visit feeders at backyards, nature centers, community areas, and other locales in many places in North America. FeederWatchers periodically count the birds they see at their feeders from November through early April and send their counts to Project FeederWatch. FeederWatch data help scientists track broad scale movements of winter bird

populations and long-term trends in bird distribution and abundance.

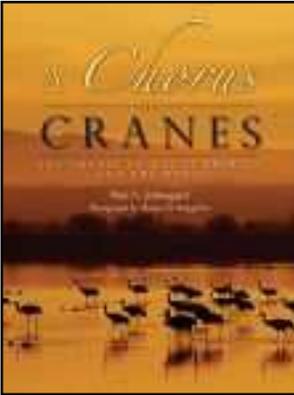
Anyone interested in birds can participate. FeederWatch is conducted by people of all skill levels and backgrounds, including children, families, individuals, classrooms, retired persons, youth groups, nature centers, and bird clubs. Participants watch their feeders as much or as little as they want over two consecutive days as often as every week (less often is fine). They count birds that appear in their count site because of something that they provided (plantings, food, or water). New participants are sent a Research Kit with complete instructions for participating, as well as a bird identification poster and more. You provide the feeder (s) and seed. Then each fall participants receive a 16-page, year-end report, *Winter Bird Highlights*. Participants also receive the Cornell Lab newsletter.

There is a \$18 annual participation fee for U.S. residents (\$15 for Cornell Lab members). The participation fee covers materials, staff support, web design, data analysis, and the year-end report (*Winter Bird Highlights*). Project FeederWatch is supported almost entirely by participation fees. Without the support of our participants, this project wouldn't be possible.

Project FeederWatch is operated by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Bird Studies Canada. For more information go to the website <http://feederwatch.org>

**LOOK FOR BLUE MOUNTAIN AUDUBON
ON
FACEBOOK**

Books



A Chorus of Cranes

The Cranes of North
America
and the World

by Paul A. Johnsgard,
photographs by Thomas D.
Mangelsen

Accompanied by the
stunning photography of
Thomas D. Mangelsen, *A
Chorus of Cranes* details the

natural history, biology, and conservation issues surrounding the abundant sandhill crane and the endangered whooping crane in North America. Author Paul A. Johnsgard, one of the leading authorities on cranes and crane biology, describes the fascinating social behaviors, beautiful natural habitats, and grueling seasonal migrations that have stirred the hearts of people as far back as medieval times and garnered the crane a place in folklore and mythology across continents.

Johnsgard has substantially updated and significantly expanded his 1991 work *Crane Music*, incorporating new information on the biology and status of these two North American cranes and providing abbreviated summaries on the other thirteen crane species of the world. The stories of these birds and their contrasting fates provide an instructive and moving history of bird conservation in north America.

A Chorus of Cranes is a gorgeous and invaluable resource for crane enthusiasts, birders, natural historians, and conservationists alike.

"Professor Paul Johnsgard is the world's leading synthesizer of our knowledge of birds and the presenter of such varied and complex information to both professional and lay audiences. He has made an enormous contribution to our planet. . . . In his latest book, A Chorus of Cranes, the splendor of Johnsgard's lyrical style is matched by incomparable images from one of the world's best-known photographers, and fellow Nebraskan, Tom Mangelsen."

-George Archibald, Co-Founder and Senior
Conservationist,
International Crane Foundation

Bird of the Month

GREAT GRAY OWL *Strix nebulosa*



Size: 27 inches

Description: A very large, owl with yellow eyes, gray streaked underparts, gray facial disks with darker rings, and two white horizontal marks below the chin.

Photo by Paul Treman

The great gray owl is the tallest American owl with the largest wingspan, but it is just a ball of feathers. Both the great horned and snowy owls weigh half again as much and have larger feet and talons.

They make their home in boreal forests, wooded bogs and dense conifer forests with open areas in western mountains in the United States and Canada. Although they are primarily a nocturnal owl, they will hunt during the day in invasion years when they have been forced south in the winter to find food. They prey on small mammals. They have keen hearing and can locate mice below the surface of the snow by hearing them and then plunging down through the snow to capture them.

Great gray owls nest in old eagle and hawk nests, broken-topped dead trees and witch's brooms in the top of conifers. Clutch size is 2-4 eggs. The male feeds the female from incubation through small nestling stage. Young return to roost in the nest well after fledging and remain with their parents for up to several months.

Great gray owls are known to nest in the Blue Mountains. They are not easy to find, but it is possible to see them anytime of the year. However, the best time to search is late June after the young have fledged but are still begging for food from their parents. They are noisy!! They have also been seen in the winter in the past in several places in the Walla Walla Valley—Bennington Lake, Touchet/Lowden Road and north of Milton-Freewater.

Maybe this will be one of those years when a great gray owl will visit us here in the valley. We can only hope!

The Christmas Bird Count at a Glance

Prior to the turn of the 20th century, people engaged in a holiday tradition known as the Christmas "Side Hunt": They would choose sides and go afield with their guns; whoever brought in the biggest pile of feathered (and furred) quarry won.

Conservation was in its beginning stages around in that era, and many observers and scientists were becoming concerned about declining bird populations. Beginning on Christmas Day 1900, ornithologist Frank M. Chapman, an early officer in the then nascent Audubon Society, proposed a new holiday tradition—a "Christmas Bird Census"—that would count birds during the holidays rather than hunt them. So began the Christmas Bird Count. Thanks to the inspiration of Chapman and the enthusiasm of twenty-seven dedicated birders, twenty-five Christmas Bird Counts were held that day. The locations ranged from Toronto, Ontario to Pacific Grove, California with most counts in or near the population centers of northeastern North America. Those original 27 participants tallied around 90 species on all the counts combined. From small beginnings, the Christmas Bird Count has grown to an International Event enjoyed by thousands of participants. In 2013 72,531 participants from 17 countries counted birds in 1,823 locations.

Here in Walla Walla, the first Christmas Bird Count was held December 30, 1973. A total of 72 species were counted by 23 participants. Total number of individual birds counted was 7,725. The weather was cloudy with 7-9 inches of snow on the ground. Temperatures hovered around freezing most of the day. Last year the count was held on December 14. A total of 87 species were counted by 47 participants, either in the count circle or from back yards. The total number of individual birds counted was 10,638. The weather was foggy and hovered around 32 degrees.

Memories from the past....



Board Meeting Highlights

At the November 12 board meeting George announced that Tom Land has agreed to be the Natural Area Coordinator for BMAS. He will work with the previous coordinators and the City of Walla Walla to come up with a plan.

Goals for 2015-2016 were discussed by the group. They included:

- A Kids Bird Count in partnership with the Walla Walla Public Library
- Sponsorship of a free science book box in partnership with Whitman College and the Carnegie Picture Lab
- Plans to increase BMAS involvement with local conservation groups in regards to local global warming issues.
- Involvement with local environmental groups to educate public about conservation of ground water, installation of barn owl boxes in vineyards and raptor safe uses of rodent management.

The board voted to give \$300 to the Center for Biological Diversity for their assistance in efforts to save the trees on Mill Creek.

Judy noted that a recent photo by Jim Parrish of the aurora borealis on the Blue Mountain Audubon Facebook page was shared 187 times and seen by over 21,000 people. Wow!! Here's the photo for those of you who missed it on Facebook.



The board voted to give \$500 to Blue Mountain Wildlife. This is an on-going annual donation that BMAS makes to this very worthwhile organization that does so much to educate the public and rehabilitate raptors in Eastern Washington and Northeast Oregon. To keep current on what's happening at Blue Mountain Wildlife, check out their Facebook page.

<https://www.facebook.com/bluemountainwildlife>

Musings by Chris Howard

Gratitude

Perhaps it had something to do with being close to Thanksgiving. I stepped out the back door into a cool but sunny Tuesday. I was then happily surprised by the gift of a chipper little Red Breasted Nuthatch in the crab apple tree on the way to my bicycle. The cool air was invigorating as I peddled to Bennington Lake where I met the rest of the Audubon Tuesday morning bird group. We were all quite pleased by the smorgasbord of ducks and geese paddling about on the lake. There were Buffleheads dressed in their formal black and white attire cruising about in their own small flock choosing not to mix with the larger, also stately dressed, male and female Common Mergansers. A Long Billed Dowitcher drilled into the mud on the shore of the lake. It was soft honking which alerted us to 4 dazzlingly white swans with their long necks stretched out flying toward the lake. We all watched with upraised binoculars as the swans swooped down toward the water then soared upward, circled the lake, then flew right over our heads with the sun glistening on their snow white wings. Then they headed off to the south.

Continuing around the lake, a Great Horned Owl was spotted in a grove of golden Alder trees, the gold of the leaves matching its big round blinking eyes. A little further on, I separated from the group and dipped down onto a less defined trail that winds its way through the woods along a canal. Stepping through the wet grass and broken limbs as quietly as possible, I suddenly felt something watching me. Stopping and turning to my right I came eye to eye with a Great Horned Owl perched 30 feet away on a horizontal broken limb just 4 feet above the ground. It was not the least bit concerned about my presence. I just stood there, taking in the minutest details of its feathered beauty through my binoculars. Giving thanks to the owl, I headed up out of the woods to meet the rest of the group. They were all a twitter to be viewing a magnificent little Northern Saw-Whet Owl that just happened to be perched on low branches directly across from the bench Mike Denny had sat on to take a rest. After checking for any wires that Mike may have used to secure the bird, I sat down next to him to enjoy the view. Cameras clicked as the little owl sat motionless with its head tucked over its shoulder. It was all puffed up and looked like a child's plush stuffed animal. What a wonderful gift!

In the Field...by Ginger Shoemake

The weather definitely changed on October 31. It rained hard most of the day and the winds whipped around causing most of the leaves to fall. The birds found refuge at our feeders and we even had an unexpected visit from a **Cassin's finch**.

Mike and MerryLynn birded from Walla Walla to the Columbia River on November 1. They were surprised at the number of raptors they saw—3 **merlins**, 6 **Cooper's hawks**, 2 **sharp-shinned hawks**, 4 **rough-legged hawks** and numerous **red-tailed hawks**, **kestrels** and **northern harriers**. At Whitman Mission Mike found a leucistic **American robin**—all white with a black eye and reddish orange breast.



George Jameson watched a immature **Cooper's hawk** checking out the house sparrows in his yard on November 2. It seemed unconcerned about his presence so he was able to get this great photo.

MerryLynn found 8 **western bluebirds** on Scenic Loop on November 2.

It was a wet walk for the Bennington Lake Walkers on November 3, but we were rewarded with great birds! On the water were 33 **tundra swans**, 3 **Barrow's goldeneyes**, 4 **Bonaparte's gulls**, 8 **canvasbacks**, 16 **lesser scaup**, 15 **green-winged teal**, 9 **mallards** and 2 **western grebes**. The **great egret** was on the shore near the swans. Paul Treman took this nice photo that shows both immature and adult swans.



There have been reports of flocks of **grey-crowned rosy finches**. On October 27, George and Deanna Jameson came across a flock of about 100 on Steptoe Butte. Mike and MerryLynn found large flocks in two places on November 6—Donally Road and Lower Monumental Dam. Bob and Linda Hanson went out to the dam on November 7, and Linda took several photos with her phone including this one that shows the bank swallow holes in the gravel pit and two finches who appear to be talking over the day's events.



Mike and MerryLynn were back out on November 7 scouring the county for birds. They found a **white-faced ibis** (very late), a **rusty blackbird** and a **common grackle** at the blood ponds on Dodd Road. This is a pretty disgusting place to bird, but there can be great birds found there if you can stand the smell and are willing to look through a ton of birds to find that rare one, as was the case with the rusty blackbird and the grackle. They were in a flock of about 1600 **Brewer's blackbirds**. It's also a place where a scope is very handy—but that means you have to get out of the car and fight the smell and the flies. Oh what Mike and MerryLynn will do to find a rare bird!!

On November 8, Mike and MerryLynn saw a flock of **bohemian waxwings** on Biscuit Ridge Road.

On November 9, Dave Gibson sent me this photo of a sharp-shinned hawk that was chasing a sparrow in his yard and bounced off the window while in pursuit. The hawk was stunned but soon got it's bearings and flew off. Presumably, the sparrow also lived to see another day!



While walking his dogs on November 9, George saw a flock of about 38 **wild turkeys** near the pond on Taumarson Road. He figured they knew there would be

a field trip in a few days and wanted to be sure we knew they were there and ready to be in the count.

It was a good owl day at Bennington Lake on our Tuesday Morning walk November 10. While sitting at the bench on the east side Mike spotted a **northern saw whet owl** low in the shrubs just across the trail. Everyone got great looks and many photos were taken including this great one by Jim Parrish.



The group also saw a **long-eared owl** and a **great horned owl**. There were **common mergansers**, **mallards**, **ring-necked ducks**, a **western grebe**, a **bufflehead**, a **hooded merganser** and **canada geese** on the water. Four **tundra swans** circled overhead, but didn't land. There was one **long-billed dowitcher** in the mud on the south side and lots of **mountain chickadees**, **black capped chickadees**, **ruby-crowned kinglets**, **juncos**, **white-crowned sparrows**, **house finches**, **red-winged blackbirds** and **robins** in the trees.



Six of us joined Tom Scribner on November 14 for the annual Turkey Trot. We counted 127 **wild turkeys** in Walla Walla and Columbia counties. We saw a total of 31 species including **pine grosbeaks**, a **Pacific wren**, a **northern shrike**, a **pileated woodpecker** and three **western bluebirds**.

Bruce Toews watched a **prairie falcon** hunting the fields at the corner of Stateline and Powerline roads on November 14.

On November 14, Mike and MerryLynn found 22 **common loons**, 2 **red-necked grebes**, a **northern goshawk** and a **northern saw-whet owl** along with many other birds around the County. They also noted a large number of **common mergansers** and both **Barrow's** and **common goldeneyes** below Ice Harbor Dam.

Rodger watched a **rough-legged hawk** sitting on a pole on Stateline Road on November 17. It had been there the previous week when he went by the same spot, so there must be a good supply of rodents in the area.

Joanne Hesser-James saw a **spotted towhee** in the Natural Area the week of November 16.

On November 19, Susan Payne reported 23 **evening grosbeaks** at her feeder. She has had one or two in the past but this was the largest flock she has seen in her yard.

Christopher Lindsey found a **pygmy owl** on Scenic Loop on November 20. He also saw 12 **wild turkeys** (where were they on the day of the Turkey Trot!) Other notable sightings were 9 **varied thrushes** and 8 **mountain chickadees**.

Varied thrushes are coming into town with the cold weather. Priscilla Dauble had one in her yard a week ago, Melissa Cummins sent a photo to Facebook of one in her yard on November 2, and George reported one in his yard the same day. They are attracted to berries left on flowering trees and shrubs and often root around on the ground to look for tasty morsals.

The weather has turned cold and our local birds need your help. Supplemental food in a backyard feeder and a birdbath with fresh water will help birds when the ground is frozen and natural food sources are hard to find. If you have a corner in your yard, also consider a brush pile for the birds. It gives them protection from the cold weather and from predators. Not only are you helping out the birds, you will get hours of enjoyment right in your backyard.

Email me to let me know what you are seeing. housewren084@gmail.com

BLUE MOUNTAIN AUDUBON
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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

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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Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip Code: _____