

# The Magpiper

March, 2016

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## Monthly Calendar

### Thursday, March 10

Board Meeting  
7:00 p.m.

### Thursday, March 17

Membership Meeting  
7:00 p.m.  
Whitman College

### Sunday, March 13

Field Trip - 8:00 a.m.  
Harper Joy Theatre Parking lot

**President:** George Jameson

**Vice President:** Jeff Fredson

**Secretary:** Paul and Judy Treman

**Treasurer:** Jonathan Webster

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**Education:** Kathy McConnell

**Membership:** Melissa Webster and  
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Joanne Hesser-James,  
Jill Hesser-Gardiner

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**Facebook Admin:** Judy Treman

**Field Trips:** Paul Treman

**Magpiper Editor:** Ginger Shoemake

**Members at Large:** Mike Denny,  
Shirley Muse, Priscilla Dauble

**Bird Sightings:** Ginger Shoemake

## Website:

<http://www.blumtn.org>

## Bird sightings:

[housewren084@gmail.com](mailto:housewren084@gmail.com)

## Contact BMAS:

Email: [housewren084@gmail.com](mailto:housewren084@gmail.com)

Mail: PO Box 1106

Walla Walla, WA 99362

## Meeting

### Membership Meeting: March 17, 2016

*Kimball Theatre, Hunter Conservatory—Whitman College*

### PROGRAM: CLIMATE CHANGE: CONTROVERSY, CONSENSUS BIRDS, WATER AND FIRE

Barry Brunson and Judy Hallisey will present a program on climate change. We all have heard statements like “Global warming is just a hoax! Maybe the Earth is warming, but humans didn’t cause it! The climate is changing, but there’s nothing we can do about it!” They will discuss the actual science, and the nature of consensus vs. controversy. For select species, they will examine maps of current habitat and projected changes if current climate trends continue, based on the major report National Audubon released in September 2014. While recognizing that major national and international efforts are needed, they will point the way toward what we can do on an individual and community basis. Part of this involves promoting the use of native plants that are simultaneously bird-friendly, drought-resistant, and compatible with fire-wise practices.

Barry is a retired math professor and Chair of the Kittitas Audubon Climate Change Committee. Judy is a retired Forest Service District Ranger, a hydrologist, and has many years of experience in dealing with wildland fires and their after effects.

**NOTE: LOCATION CHANGE FOR MEETING—KIMBALL THEATRE**

## Field Trip

### CURLEWS AND SHOOTING STARS

**Sunday, March 13 - 8:00 a.m.**



Mike & MerryLynn Denny will lead a birding and wildflower trip highlighted by a search for Long-billed Curlews and Desert Shooting Stars. We will stop south of Lowden to look for Wilson's Snipe and swallows, continue west to Byrnes Road and 9-Mile Canyon to look for Rock Wrens and Ferruginous Hawk, and then head to Hatch Grade for lunch and to enjoy the wildflowers.

After lunch we’ll explore Wallula Gap for White-throated Swifts, Canyon Wren, and more wildflowers. The trip will end at the Millet Pond on Northshore Drive where we will scope for waterfowl and look for early shorebirds, such as Black-necked Stilt and American Avocet.

Meet at the Harper Joy Theater parking lot at 8 a.m. and **plan to car pool**. Bring water, lunch and snacks. Also bring your binoculars, scope (if you have one), a lawn chair, and your bird and wildflower field guides. Contact Mike or MerryLynn if you have any questions [m.denny@charter.net](mailto:m.denny@charter.net) or **529-0080**.



## Events

### 35th ANNUAL HARNEY COUNTY MIGRATORY BIRD FESTIVAL April 8-10, 2016

The Harney County Migratory Bird Festival is held the second weekend of April and offers a variety of activities for bird watching enthusiasts. Located in the high desert of Southeast Oregon the festival occurs during the height of the spring sandhill crane, waterfowl and shorebird migrations along the Pacific Flyway. The Festival offers spectacular bird watching opportunities. Over 100 species of birds can be viewed during the festival including thousands of "white geese". Other festival activities include a wildlife art show and kids zone.



Greater Sandhill Cranes will be the topic for the Friday Evening Presentation. Crane Biologist Dr. Gary Ivey will talk about the three sandhill crane subspecies that breed and migrate through Oregon. You don't want to miss this fascinating presentation about these iconic birds!



Greater Sage-Grouse are the topic of the Saturday Evening Presentation. Join US Fish and Wildlife Biologist Angela Sitz for a fascinating evening exploring the life and times of Greater Sage-Grouse in Eastern Oregon.

*Photo by Barbara Wheeler Photography*

### OTHELLO SANDHILL CRANE FESTIVAL March 18-20, 2016

The Othello Sandhill Crane Festival will be held this year on March 18-20. The festival includes tours for crane viewing and specialty tours: burrowing owl, Columbia National Wildlife Refuge, Missoula Floods and more.

Pre-registration is recommended as most tours fill quickly. The festival fee includes admission to lectures at Othello High School and the educational displays and vendor exhibits in the high school gym on Saturday.

The banquet on Saturday evening will be David Moskowitz, biologist, photographer, and outdoor educator. His lecture will be Wildlife of the Pacific Northwest.

For more information regarding the festival and updates go to: [www.othellosandhillcranefestival.org](http://www.othellosandhillcranefestival.org)



*Photo by George Jameson*

## *The World Around Us*

### **WHY DO OWLS BOB THEIR HEAD?**

*Audubon Bird Note February, 2016*

If you were to stand face to face with an owl, after a while it would start to move its head, bobbing rhythmically from side to side, then forward, then back. Or almost completely upside down. All while still looking at you, with its body still facing the front. Is the owl trying to communicate something? Is this, perhaps, some kind of dance?



*Great Gray Owl Chick—photo by Rodger Shoemake*

All these varied head movements help the owl judge the position and distance of things around it—essentially, to triangulate on objects, including potential prey, and to build a composite picture of its surroundings. This head-bobbing helps make up for an anatomical limitation: An owl's eyes are fixed in position, so they simply can't move the way our eyes do. To look up, down, or to the side, an owl has to move its head. They have very flexible necks and can do 270 degrees of a full head turn, looking over one shoulder, around the back, and almost over the opposite shoulder. And after a few of these head-bobs to triangulate on their prey, they rarely miss.

It's not only owls that measure the world this way. Most other birds of prey, like falcons and hawks, have the same intent, fixed, predator's eyes, and so they, too, perform their share of head bobs, figuring out what's what and what's where.

## *Bird of the Month*

### **LONG-BILLED CURLEW**

*Numenius americanus*



*Photo by Rodger Shoemake*

Size: 23-25 inches  
Description: Long-legged shorebird with a very long down-curved bill. Mottled brown upperparts with a buffy, subtly streaked belly. Under side of wings are bright cinnamon.

The long-billed curlews are North America's largest shorebird. They spend summers in areas of western North America with sparse, short grasses, mixed grass prairies and agricultural fields. In the winter they migrate to coasts where they are found in wetlands, tidal estuaries, mudflats and flooded fields. Although their diet includes many species of invertebrates, their bill is best adapted for capturing shrimp and crabs on tidal flats in the winter or burrowing earthworms in pastures in the summer.

Nest building begins by making a shallow scrape in the ground. Once the depression is formed, materials such as pebbles, bark, animal droppings twigs, etc are used to line the nest which is about 8 inches across and 3 inches deep. The male makes several scrapes as part of courtship and the female chooses one. Nests are often put near objects like rocks or piles of dirt or manure, as landmarks, provide shade, or hide the nest. Normal clutch size is 4.

Long-billed curlews are often seen probing for food during the breeding season in groups, in pairs, or by themselves. However, around the nest they are highly territorial and exhibit a variety of threat displays. When flying, curlews jump into the air to take off and then alternate between flapping and gliding.

The major continuing treat to long-billed curlews is habitat loss. Loss of grasslands for nesting in Walla Walla County has caused their populations here to decline dramatically in the past 20 years. On the March field trip, Mike and MerryLynn will show us one of the few places where it is possible to find these beautiful shorebirds.

## *The World of Birds*

### **GETTING READY FOR SPRING BIRDS**

*Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife  
February, 2016*

Spring may officially be several weeks off, but now is the time to get your bird nest boxes cleaned out and ready for new, incoming occupants. If you don't already have nest boxes up, this is the time to either build or buy and place them, WDFW has plans at <http://wdfw.wa.gov/living/projects/nestboxes/index.html>

Many backyard birding enthusiasts who use nest boxes leave them up year-round and leave nesting materials in them through the winter, when some birds will use them as nighttime roost sites. But migrating birds that use cavities for nesting, like bluebirds, swallows and wrens, will be returning next month and they prefer clean quarters to follow their instincts to build their own nests. All nest boxes attract insects – mites, lice, fleas, flies, hornets, spiders and more. In small numbers they are relatively harmless to birds, but in larger numbers they can cause injuries and even fatalities to young birds. Inspect all nest boxes to clean out insects and also to remove the old nesting material. Although some diligent and industrious birds will remove old nesting material before building their own particular nest, many more will just build on top of an old nest. That kind of layering can raise the nest dangerously close to the entrance hole where predators might reach eggs or young.

Your inspection may turn up dead nestlings or infertile eggs, which of course should also be removed. Be sure to use protective gloves, maybe even a dust mask, and dispose of everything you find in nest boxes away from the site to avoid smells that can attract predators. Nest box maintenance includes tightening screws, loosening lag bolts, unblocking drainage holes, and generally making sure everything is secure and working right.

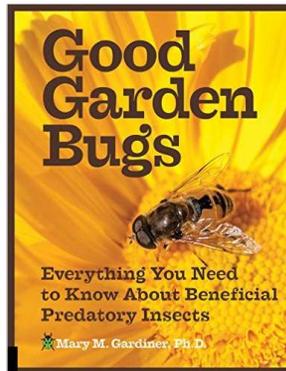
If you find a nest box in your collection that year after year goes unused, consider relocating it. It might not be in the appropriate habitat or suitable height location for the species it's built for, or perhaps it's in the right place but is not built correctly. Check the entrance hole size, overall size dimensions, and other factors that are important to, and different for, various species of nest-box-using birds. If the same nest box turns up dead nestlings or infertile eggs more than once, consider relocation to avoid competitors or predators, or remodeling to protect the species using the box. A predator block – just a one-inch thick piece of wood drilled with the appropriate size hole – mounted over the

entrance hole to create a short tunnel into the nest, can deter starlings, raccoons, or squirrels that have chewed the original hole bigger.

Another improvement is to remove any perch post projecting out from the front of a nest box. Our native cavity-nesting birds don't need these perches but they are used by more aggressive non-native birds to harass nesting birds.

If you often have earlier-arriving starlings or English house sparrows dominating your nest box site, you may want to plug the entrance hole until later this spring when martins or swallows or other native species arrive. Small paper cups and other such plugs work well. Remember to remove the plug as soon as you see your "target" species return to the area, or when you otherwise learn of its return to your area. (Online birding chat groups can be a good source of news about migratory bird movements.)

If you watch a nest box closely enough this spring to know when birds have finished raising a brood, you can clean out the box again to encourage another pair to use it or the same pair to nest again. Just don't bother an obviously occupied nest box.



### **GOOD GARDEN BUGS**

**By Mary Gardiner**

**Your guide to the beneficial insects in your garden!** *Good Garden Bugs* is an easy-to-follow reference to beneficial insects that provide pest control, allowing your garden to grow full and bountiful. Aphids, caterpillars, grubs, and

slugs are not only creepy-crawlies: They can wreak havoc on your garden and plants.

But fear not! You don't need dangerous chemicals to enjoy a lively, healthy garden. The secret? More lady beetles, fewer aphids! Wildlife in your garden--especially insects--can be natural pesticide alternatives. From mantids to beetles to wasps, spiders, and everything in between, entomologist Mary Gardiner tells you how to identify these beneficial bugs, how to enhance your home landscape as a habitat, and how to work with them to grow and enjoy your garden.

## *The World Around Us*

### BREEDING LIKE RABBITS

*Nature Conservancy Magazine, Feb/March 2016*

North America's smallest rabbit species may finally be bouncing back from the edge of extinction in eastern Washington. Habitat loss to agriculture and development at the end of the 20th century sent the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit into such a steep decline that in 2002 biologists staged an intervention. They brought 16 of the rabbits (every last one they could find) to breeding facilities. But traditional captive breeding didn't work well. Finally in 2010, Penny Becker, a wildlife biologist with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, stepped in with a new strategy.

The idea was to try breeding in a more natural setting. The agency enclosed large parcels of shrub-steppe with coyote-proof fencing, added covered areas for protection from raptors and installed premade burrows. In this more realistic environment, rabbits selected their own mates and their offspring were able to develop and practice survival skills. It worked. These days, the enclosures are hopping, with some females giving birth to five litters of kits in a single year.

Since 2011, more than 1,800 rabbits have been released into the wild, most recently 342 at The Nature Conservancy's Beezley Hills Preserve in 2015. The normal survival rate of wild pygmy rabbits is less than 15 percent, says Joann Wisniewski, the state biologist who has overseen releases for the past three years. The population of released rabbits is only now getting large enough for her to begin gathering data on whether the newcomers are surviving at acceptable levels. "We are very optimistic," she says.



Columbia Basin Pygmy Rabbit

Size: 9.25-11.65 inches

Habitat: tall sagebrush

Food: Herbivore grazers that eat mostly sagebrush

## *Musings by Chris Howard*

### **Just Around the Corner**

There is something special about this time of year. It feels like there is an end in sight to the cold, darkness of winter. The days are definitely getting longer. The added daylight is especially helpful for those suffering from the winter blahs. Spring is just around the corner.

Long before we had grocery stores with year round produce, toward the end of the winter when all the stored berries had been eaten, the Native Americans would at times suffer from the effects of vitamin C deficiency also known as scurvy. For some tribes, their remedy was found in the appearance of Skunk Cabbage protruding from the wetlands in the early Spring. Early settlers in the frozen North looked forward to the emergence of Dandelion plants they had transported from Europe to meet their increasing vitamin C needs. Yes, the Dandelion was, and still is, highly valued for its many medicinal properties rather than viewed as a pesky weed. There are even Dandelion cookbooks!

Around this time of year, try playing a mindfulness awareness game which helps to celebrate the coming of Spring. When walking around outdoors on daily activities take special notice of each new sign of Spring. Stop to really soak in the white of the tiny Snow Drops and the yellow or purple of the Crocuses that are among the first flowers to emerge from their winter slumber. Take notice of the buds slowly becoming larger on the trees and shrubs. It's interesting to watch the same tree each day and see how the leaves slowly unfurl. Flowering trees are especially fun to watch, imagining your daily view as a time lapse photographer.

Pay special attention to new bird songs in the neighborhood. My ears perk up as I step out in the morning and hear the sweet, drawn out song of the Black Capped Chickadee calling for a mate...Feeee-bee, Feeee-bee. Walking down the street I am captivated by the loud drumming and Wik!-Wik!-Wik! of the Northern Flicker who has found a neighbor's metal chimney to be the perfect instrument for announcing his mating intentions.

Watch for the influx of migrating ducks at Bennington Lake and the Walla Walla Delta and Sandhill Cranes flying overhead. And if anyone doubts the coming of Spring, I heard the first frog croak at our pond this week! RRRRRbbbit!

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

Paul Treman saw a flock of western bluebirds on the golf course on February 1.

Snow geese and tundra swans were at McNary NWR on February 5. They should be around all month so hopefully many of you will get a chance to see them.

On February 4 Melissa Cummins reported a pair of canada geese on the osprey platform north of Highway 12 near Lowden. They often take over the platforms for nesting before the osprey arrive.

Mike and MerryLynn led their WOS Owls by Day field trip on February 6. They visited the parks long the Snake River and found 5 great horned owls, 8 northern saw-whet owls, 3 barn owls and 2 long-eared owls. Other nice birds seen were brown creepers, purple finches, long-tailed ducks, lesser goldfinches and gray-crowned rosy finches.

Christopher Lindsey found a common grackle in with over 1000 Brewer's blackbirds at the Wallula poop piles on February 6.

On February 10, MerryLynn found two white-breasted nuthatches at Fort Walla Walla Park.

Del Henry sent the following report on February 13. "On our little slice of heaven this morning we have on our little pond: 5 or 6 ring-necked ducks, a pair of hooded mergansers, 3 pairs of wood ducks (we have 2 nesting boxes), dozens of canada geese, several mallards, 2 pairs of buffleheads and a pair of American wigeons. Also our first red-winged blackbirds, robins in the trees, and too many collared doves. A sure sign of Spring!"

Mike and MerryLynn found two short eared owls in the Gardena area on February 12. The next day they were out on the west side of the county looking for waterfowl and gulls. At Two Rivers HMU they found 14 red-breasted mergansers with the usual ducks and grebes and 29 bald eagles. At Casey Pond there were more gulls, ducks and geese including over 400 white-fronted geese and 4200+ snow geese. At Peninsula HMU were 45 ruddy ducks and at the "poop piles" they found in excess of 2000 blackbirds including several tri-colored blackbirds and over 30 yellow-headed blackbirds.

Jim and Sue Parrish found three western bluebirds in the city cemetery on February 14. Jim was able to get some great photos of them including this one.



Twenty-nine birders joined George Jameson on a field trip to McNary NWR on February 20 to look for snow geese and other waterfowl. We started the morning with great looks at a western screech owl that spends its day under the roof at Memorial Building on the Whitman College campus. On the drive to the refuge we saw several red-tailed hawks and American kestrels. At the refuge we witnessed a phenomenal spectacle. In the span of about 20 minutes over 20,000 snow geese left the fields at the south end of the refuge and headed for the ponds east of Headquarters and beyond. It was a unforgettable sight to watch wave after wave of them fly over us and calling as they passed. At Headquarters we saw several thousand of them that had landed east of the road. There were also over 100 tundra swans and at least one trumpeter swan. There weren't a huge number of ducks on the ponds, but there was a nice variety. On the way back down Highway 12 to Wallula Junction, the trees were dotted with bald eagles.



*Snow geese—photo by Jim Parrish*

On February 21, I noticed a pair of **lesser goldfinches** at the thistle feeder along with over 40 **American goldfinches**—a few that were beginning to molt. The **evening grosbeaks** swarmed the platform feeders and the **magpies** fought over the peanuts in one of the feeders. The **black-capped chickadee** pair were looking over one of the nesting boxes and **house sparrows** had taken over another one already. Rodger and I are moving on March 1 to a new location in Walla Walla. I will miss my yard birds. I've seen 113 different species in the 20 years I have been keeping track of them and they have been a very important part of my life. However, I am excited to start a new yard list and discover what birds will visit us at our new home along Yellowhawk Creek.

Mike Denny saw a **northern goshawk** on Campbell Road on February 21. Earlier in the day he and MerryLynn drove up Jasper Mountain Road. There was a **northern shrike** at the first bluebird box. They also saw 6 **hairy woodpeckers**, 10 **western bluebirds** checking out the nesting boxes and all three species of **chickadees—mountain, black-capped** and **chestnut-backed**.

Jim Parrish took this wonderful photo of a **Say's phoebe** on Birch Creek Road on February 22.



On February 23, several **western bluebirds** greeted the Tuesday walkers at the bench overlooking Bennington Lake.

Jim and Sue Parrish joined Mike and MerryLynn on February 24 on a trip up Jasper Mountain to clean out bluebird boxes. **Western bluebirds** were active at several boxes and a **mountain bluebird** landed on a new box just after it was placed. They had a special treat—a **great gray owl** hunting at dusk.

The excitement of migration is about to begin. Email me with your sightings. [housewren084@gmail.com](mailto:housewren084@gmail.com)

**MIGRATION BEGINS**

Spring is just around the corner and its time to start looking for migrants. Shorebirds and other birds that nest further north will start to come through, and the first of our summer nesting birds will return. Look and listen for these birds during March.

- Sandhill crane
- Long-billed curlew
- Caspian tern
- Savannah sparrow
- Violet-green swallow
- Tree swallow
- Turkey vulture
- American avocet
- White-throated swift
- Loggerhead shrike
- Red-naped sapsucker
- Hermit thrush
- Mountain bluebird
- Vesper sparrow
- Fox sparrow
- Northern rough-winged swallow
- Cliff swallow
- Black-necked stilt



**Caspian Tern**  
Photo by MerryLynn Denny

**Black-necked stilt**  
Photo by Rodger Shoemaker



**American avocet**  
Photo by George Jameson

**LOOK FOR BLUE MOUNTAIN AUDUBON ON FACEBOOK**

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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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