

The Magpiper

May, 2016

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Monthly Calendar

Thursday, May 12

Board Meeting
7:00 p.m.

Thursday, May 19

Membership Meeting
7:00 p.m.
Whitman College

Saturday, May 14

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

Saturday, June 11

Field Trip—7:30 a.m.
Harper Joy Theatre Parking Lot

Saturday, June 18

Field Trip—8:00 a.m.
Harper Joy Theatre Parking Lot

President: George Jameson

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Conservation: Chris Howard

Education: Kathy McConnell

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Publicity: Jonathan Webster

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Bluebird Trails: Tom Scribner

Adopt a Highway: Mike James,
Joanne Hesser-James,
Jill Hesser-Gardiner

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Field Trips: Paul Treman

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Shirley Muse, Priscilla Dauble

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Meeting

Membership Meeting: May 19—7:00 p.m.

Room 157 Olin Hall, Whitman College

PROGRAM: WHO ARE YOU CALLING BIRD BRAIN?



Pigeons are often viewed as an unremarkable bird species (even viewed by some as little more than a nuisance). Yet, the humble pigeon has proven to be a valuable contributor to the behavioral and cognitive sciences. Whitman College Professor Wally Herbranson will describe current research on cognition in pigeons, with a focus on how their abilities compare to those of humans. Can studying pigeons provide insight into the bases of memory, perception, and attention? Are pigeons ever smarter than people? Let's find out.

Wally received his Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Utah, and has been studying pigeon learning and cognition for over 20 years. He teaches courses on learning, comparative psychology, and neuroscience at Whitman College. His favorite part of each day is working with the 32 industrious white carneaux pigeons in the comparative cognition lab.

May Field Trip

JUNIPER DUNES WILDERNESS

Saturday, May 14 – 8:00 a.m.

Most people have heard of the BLM managed Juniper Dunes Wilderness, but few people have been there. If this description fits you, or even if you have been to the Juniper Dunes area, this is an opportunity to see a wilderness area unlike any other Washington wilderness. Sand dunes, native grasses, Washington's largest remaining juniper groves, and sagebrush dominate the wilderness and are home to diverse wildlife.

Chris Howard is a frequent visitor to the Juniper Dunes Wilderness and will lead the field trip. For those of you not familiar with the wilderness, it is located several miles east of Pasco and north of the Snake River. We will be walking through sand dunes with little or no shade so bring your hiking boots, hat, and sunscreen; and wear appropriate clothing. We will be having lunch on top of a sand dune while enjoying the views, so plan to carry your lunch and plenty of water.

Meet at the Harper Joy Theater parking lot and we will car pool, returning mid-afternoon. Please call or e-mail Chris if you have any questions: [522-2374](tel:522-2374) or chrish.734@gmail.com



June Field Trips

SUMMER BIRDS

Saturday, June 11—7:30 a.m.



Join Rodger and Ginger Shoemake as they take a leisurely walk along Foster Road and South Fork Russell Creek Road looking and listening for summer migrants. By this time all the summer nesting birds should be back.

Bullock's oriole photo by George Jameson

We will be looking for yellow-breasted chats and other warblers, flycatchers, hummingbirds, vireos, Bullock's orioles, black-headed grosbeaks, house wrens and more. Early morning is the best time to see and hear the birds.

This will be a half-day trip and will involve some walking so dress accordingly. Bring water, a snack and a friend or two. Meet at Harper Joy Theatre.

WILDFLOWERS IN THE BLUES

Saturday, June 18 – 8:00 a.m.

It's time again to join Jeff Fredson and Cheryl Baker for a trip to the Tollgate area of the Blue Mountains to look for wildflowers (and butterflies and birds). We will start at Jeff's place on Weston Mountain where last year's highlights included Phantom Orchids and seeing baby bluebirds squeezed together in the bottom of bluebird boxes. Last year we saw 106 species of wildflowers at Summit Road, Target Meadows, Bald Mountain and other locations; exceeding the high of 80 species seen on previous field trips.



Phantom orchid

Photo by Cheryl Baker

If you love wildflowers and mountain-fresh air, this is a field trip you do not want to miss. This will be an all-day trip and we will be doing a bit of walking. Check the weather forecast and dress accordingly. Don't forget to bring food, plenty of water, your binoculars, field guides and a friend or two.

Meet at Harper Joy Theater parking lot and plan to car pool. If you have questions, contact Jeff [541-215-0532](tel:541-215-0532) or Cheryl at wallagirl14@gmail.com.

Bird of the Month

SWAINSON'S HAWK *Buteo swainsoni*



Photo by Rodger Shoemake

Size: 19 inches

Description: Gray/brown with a dark bib and a white chin. They have a slender body with long wings that extend to the end of the tail when perched.

Swainson's hawks are birds of the open country. They arrive in early April from their wintering grounds as far away as Argentina. Their arrival comes about the same time another buteo, the rough-legged hawk, is leaving for its breeding grounds in the north. Their size is similar to other buteos, but in flight they can be distinguished from red-tailed hawks, who are here year-round, by the dark trailing edge on their wings.

Swainson's hawks are social raptors, and are found in groups outside the breeding season. They can be seen in the late summer, strung out on the ground, fence posts and utility poles. They migrate in kettles and may form flocks of several thousand, often moving with other raptors to create a much anticipated spectacle for birders to watch. Here in the Walla Walla Valley they can often be seen in smaller kettles before they leave in the fall.

They build a large nest of sticks, twigs and debris that is lined with grass, weed stalks and even cow dung. The nest is usually near the top of a solitary tree and may be reused year after year. Their nest is very similar to that of the red-tailed hawk and they may compete for a established nest when they return. Clutch size is 1-5 eggs. Incubation is about a month and the young remain in the nest for about 20 days. They feed their young the usual "three r's" of the North American buteo diet: rodents, rabbits and reptiles. But when they are not breeding, the adults switch to a diet made up almost exclusively of insects, especially grasshoppers and dragonflies.

Swainson's hawks are fairly easy to find in the Walla Walla Valley, especially south of Lowden/Touchet around the alfalfa fields.



Photo by Rodger Shoemake

News from the Board

Adopt a Highway

On April 3, Jill Hesser-Gardiner, Joanne Hesser-James and Mike James organized the spring cleanup of Blue Mountain Audubon's stretch of Highway 12 west of town. Eight people picked up a total of 22 bags of trash thrown out by inconsiderate drivers. Thanks to all of you for your efforts!



Education

Kathy McConnell recapped the year with the following report:



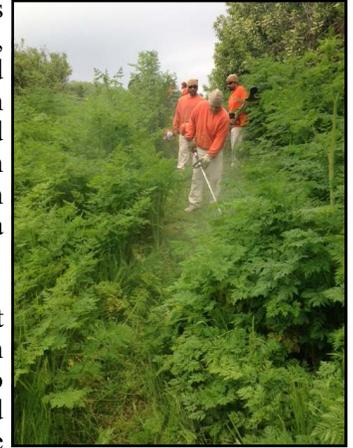
Audubon joined Whitman College Outreach for Family Science Nights in elementary schools in Walla Walla and College Place throughout this past school year. Families had the opportunity to touch bird wings and feet, match photos of beaks or feet to their use and to design their own bird through drawings. This coming year Audubon will offer a nest-making opportunity. We have had one practice event for this activity. Children and their parents got to examine bluebird, bluejay and oriole

nests, before trying to weave a nest of their own using grasses, sticks, moss, cotton, yarn and pine needles all woven into a small wire frame. Sixty-five nests were made in one hour! This coming year, I will need some assistance gathering nesting material and constructing the wire bases. Watch for alerts!

Natural Area

The Board voted to hire the work crew from the penitentiary for a day to clear out the trails at the Natural Area.

On April 28, four inmates and a correctional officer, directed by Tom Land and Chris Howard, spent seven hours clearing the trails and spreading bark. Jonathan Webster also helped out in the morning and provided a wheelbarrow.



When it became apparent that there was not enough man power or time to complete clearing and spreading bark on all the trails, it was decided to have the crew finish clearing all the trails. There is the beginning of bark on a couple of trails. Direction from the board will be requested at the May meeting to decide whether to try to organize a large Audubon work party, find a young, muscular and eager non-profit group or rehire inmates to finish the job of spreading bark. The sooner the bark gets spread the less the trail will have an opportunity to be retaken by the poison hemlock.

Barn Owl Nest Box Project

Blue Mountain Audubon has received a generous donation from The Bald Trust to help defray the various expenses incurred with the Barn Owl Nest Box Project. We greatly appreciate the donation and will put the funds to good use.

The initial stage of the project is complete with 32 boxes installed and eight more ready. There is a link to the project on the Blue Mountain Audubon webpage and a map showing where the boxes are located. There is a great deal of information on the link and photos showing some of the installations.



The boxes will be monitored and maintained during the year. Although no barn owls have found the boxes yet, a few boxes have been taken by kestrels who are also good rodent controllers.

The World Around Us

Will sing for food! Fill your feeders to increase birds' dawn chorus.

By Elizabeth Kennedy

Many birders relish the experience of waking to a chorus of birds. In fact, birdsong can be an effective alarm clock for dawn bird-watching! Once you wipe the sleep from your eyes, you can enjoy the concert while the sun rises. Birds sing throughout the day, but they are especially vigorous in the morning. You probably realize this is not their morning choir practice, but have you ever wondered why so many birds join this group activity?

Researchers have two different ideas about why birds participate in the “dawn chorus,” the term for a network of birds singing at the same time. The first idea is the “condition-dependent hypothesis.” In this explanation, a bird’s song depends on its environment, especially how much food is available. If this is the case, singing is a status update to neighbors, “I’ve got food!” A male can signal to females that he has the resources to be a good mate. Because all the birds are singing together in the morning, females are listening for an appealing male.

The other explanation is the “social-dynamic hypothesis,” which theorizes that a bird’s song is related to its interactions with neighboring birds. Rather than an announcement, this would mean that singing is a conversation, or sometimes an argument, between birds. As they sing together, some males may be using their song to intimidate and assert dominance over others.

Researchers Thibault Grava, Angélique Grava, and Ken Otter ran an experiment to test which of these hypotheses better explains the dawn chorus. They recorded and compared the singing of two groups of Black-capped Chickadees; one group had received supplemental feeding in the form of mealworms every other day and the other had received no additional food. The researchers found that well-fed birds sang more than the birds left to fend for themselves. This suggests that singing is an announcement or a “badge of status” based on the conditions the bird finds itself in. The dawn chorus is a social network, the bird’s version of Facebook, where they update their neighbors and potential mates about what is happening in their lives. Dominant and subordinate birds both increased their singing when they got extra food, indicating that song is not an attempt to intimidate others. Dominant birds do sing more as a whole, but this could simply be because they have more access to food and therefore more energy to invest in singing.

Many birders consider morning the ideal time to view birds since that is when they are most active—and full of song. By filling your bird feeder, you are strengthening the local chorus; enjoy the concert!

Sharing a Passion For “Beautiful Bees”

*Excerpts from National Wildlife Federation
Article by Laura Tangley, April 12, 2016*

Like most people, Clay Bolt once pictured the familiar black-and-yellow-striped honey bee as soon as he heard someone say the word “bee.” These much beloved but beleaguered insects were brought to this continent from Europe in the 1600s.

As for **North America’s more than 4,000 native-bee species**, “beyond bumble bees, I knew virtually nothing,” he says. To remedy that, Bolt, a nature photographer specializing in macro images, headed outside to his South Carolina backyard a few years ago and began making portraits of the bees he encountered there. What he discovered so amazed him that in 2014 Bolt launched the project “**Beautiful Bees**,” whose goal,



he says, “is to inspire people to appreciate these incredible animals that contribute so much to our lives as pollinators and as beautiful inhabitants of our world.”

Pure Green Bee *Augochlora pura*

Bees could use some of that recognition. According to biologists, native bees across North America are facing formidable threats, from habitat loss and disease to climate change and pesticides. Many native species, including four once common and widespread bumblebees, have vanished from large swaths of their former ranges—threatening the multitude of crops and native plants that depend on them for pollination.

“Honey bees do have problems of their own,” Bolt admits, “but they’ll probably be alright.” Somewhat like cattle, these bees are highly managed, largely domesticated animals with well-recognized economic value. Although native bees contribute at least \$3 billion a year to the U.S. farm economy, and are linchpins of most terrestrial ecosystems, they “easily could blink out because so few people are paying attention to them,” says Bolt.

Those subjects seem to appreciate his concern. Despite taking hundreds of photos during the past two years, Bolt has been stung just twice — “and both times it was my fault,” he says. But his good fortune is more than a lucky break: “One of many things the public doesn’t understand about native bees is that they **never or very rarely sting**,” Bolt says.

To see more of Bolt’s native-bee images, visit Clay Bolt’s website BeautifulBees.org

Migration

By the end of May all of the birds that return to our area to nest should be here. It's also a month to see some birds that are that are moving through. Here's what to look for this month.

Long-billed dowitcher
Wilson's phalarope
Franklin's gull
Forster's tern
Blue-winged teal
Lewis's woodpecker
Western wood pewee
Dusky flycatcher
Willow flycatcher
Olive-sided flycatcher

Eastern kingbird
Warbling vireo
Yellow warbler
McGillivray's warbler
Wilson's warbler
Yellow-breasted chat
Western tanager
Lark sparrow
Black-headed grosbeak
Lazuli bunting
Bullock's oriole
Common nighthawk
Veery
Swainson's thrush
Gray catbird
Green-tailed towhee



Eastern Kingbird

Photo by Judy Treman



Lark sparrow

Photo by George Jameson



Yellow-breasted chat

Photo by Rodger Shoemaker

Black-headed grosbeak

Photo by Cheryl Baker



Musings by Chris Howard

The Challenge of Nesting

The Spring migration is in full flight now. New birds are arriving weekly from their distant winter territories in the South. Some of the migrants will pass through our area heading for destinations further north while others will settle in and begin the mating and nesting rituals. This year I am offering a variation on the spring challenge of birding. I'm going to call it nesting...the challenge of finding as many nests as possible. Great Horned Owls, as early nesters, have already produced a fluffy grey and white owlet perched at the entrance of their cliff side hole. Barn Owls are hatching out young nearby. Neighborhood Red Tailed Hawks are raising their young in a tree top nest that sways in the breeze. All of these nests are relatively easy to find.

To find the well camouflaged nests of the forest birds requires a slight change in focus from birding. In nesting, I allow my eyes to shift focus similar to the shift required to decipher a hologram. The nests of small warblers, flycatchers and hummingbirds are often little bumps on a limb that perfectly blend in with the roughness of the wood. One way to track down nests is to stand quietly in the woods and watch for birds with nesting materials in their beaks or food for the young. These birds will sometimes lead one to the hidden nest. Searching for holes in tree trunks will often reveal the nesting spots for woodpeckers or secondary nesters that use old woodpecker holes. Interesting enough, nests are often hidden close to well used trails. Last year there was a flycatcher nest on a horizontal limb just 4 feet over a hiker's heads. A hummingbird nest was almost invisible just to the side of a major trail. A robin was sitting quietly in her nest just a few feet from passersby.

I am fascinated by the ability of birds to build such intricate nests using only their beaks. This amazing ability is not taught but inherited. Researchers have found that technique can improve with experience. One of my favorite nest builders is the Bullock's Oriole. This Oriole weaves a pendant bag of plant fibers, bark, hair and string. One researcher found 200 slender fibers woven together with an estimated 10,000 stitches and thousands of knots and loops...all with a beak! Another favorite of mine is the Cliff Swallow that builds nests in colonies. The nests consist of hundreds of pellets of wet mud stuck together to form a gourd like structure with a tubular entrance hole facing away from other nests. There is so much to learn about avian architecture!

Happy nesting!

In the Field...by Ginger Shoemake

Pam Fisher walked Rooks Park and Mill Creek on March 30 and found the usual birds plus a lesser goldfinch, a spotted towhee and a pileated woodpecker, and she was able to get this nice photo,



Eight of us went up Klicker Mountain Road and Jasper Mountain Road on March 30 to install and clean out bluebird boxes. While some worked, others enjoyed a nice walk in the mountains. There were 6 western bluebirds and 5 mountain bluebirds near the boxes on Jasper Mt. Other birds were scarce, but we did see 2 Say's phoebes and 2 turkey vultures.

MerryLynn found several winnowing Wilson's snipe on Lowden/Gardena Road on March 30.

Rodger and I drove up Jasper Mountain Road the evening of April 1 to look for the great gray owl that had been seen there. It flew in front of our vehicle and landed in a short pine tree where we were able to watch it for some time.

It was windy and cool for our Tuesday walk at Bennington Lake on April 5. There were mallards and ring-necked ducks on the lake, a few swallows over the water, one osprey, a pair of red-tailed hawks, a northern harrier, a great horned owl and a barn owl.

George and Deanna Jameson saw a Swainson's hawk on Depping Road on April 6. Nice to know they are back!

Rodger and I went with George and Deanna to monitor three ferruginous hawk nest platforms out by Eureka on April 6. We didn't see any activity at any of the platforms. However, Mark Vekasy from WFWS who is heading up the research project, noted that observers have reported 11 occupied territories in Walla Walla County and one in Columbia County.

Rodger and I drove to the Tri-Cities on April 7, and were surprised to see about 50 snow geese along the

highway. It's about time for them to be heading north. We also noted that the American white pelicans have returned to the island across from Boise Cascade where they nest. There were over 200 of them on the shore and flying around.

Sue Parrish had a rufous hummingbird check out her feeders on April 8. We noticed one in our yard the next day.

Earl Blackaby sent this stunning phot of a male yellow-rumped warbler to the Blue Mountain Audubon Facebook page on April 9.



On April 10, Wally Tomlinson reported seeing barn swallows and bank swallows in the Lowden/Touchet area.

On April 11, Mark Vekasy let me know that there is a pair of golden eagles nesting in the Waitsburg watershed on North Fork Coppei. This is the second confirmed nesting pair in the county.

On April 11, Pam Fisher saw a Vaux's swift along Mill Creek.

Evening grosbeaks filled the maple tree behind Pam Fisher's yard on April 12. They stayed about an hour before they all flew off.

MerryLynn reported the house wrens were back and singing at Bennington Lake on April 12.

Once again the Parrishs had a "first of the year" bird at their feeder on April 12. This time it was a calliope hummingbird.

On April 13, Rodger and I noticed four different pairs of osprey on or near platforms in the Lowden area along Highway 12. It should be fun to watch to see if they successfully nest at these sights.

MerryLynn took this awesome photo of a **great gray owl** up Jasper Mountain on April 15.



Nancy Mitchell reported the return of the **bank swallows** on Cottonwood Road on April 15—just in time for tax day!

There were a nice variety of waterfowl on Bennington Lake on April 19—**lesser scaup**, **common goldeneye**, **American wigeon**, **northern shoveler**, **bufflehead**, **green-winged teal**, **mallard**, **canada goose** and **gadwall**.

But the best bird was a **common loon** and Paul Treman was able to get this great photo.



Other birds of note were **black-necked stilt**, **calliope hummingbird**, **osprey**, and **house wren**.

Our yard was birdy the week of April 20. Of note were visits from an **orange-crowned warbler**, a **Nashville warbler**, **lesser goldfinches**, **Townsend's warbler** and both **calliope** and **rufous hummingbirds**.

Mike and MerryLynn found 2 **black-necked stilts** at the recharge pond at the corner of Stateline and Locher roads. Later in the week there were also 4 **tundra swans**, **cinnamon teal**, **greater** and **lesser yellowlegs** **western sandpipers** and **barn swallows**.

Linda Hanson walked Bennington Lake on April 21. Besides the regular birds, she found several **chipping sparrows** and a **western kingbird**.

On April 21, Pam Fisher saw several **yellow warblers** along the south side of Mill Creek. And they were singing!



On April 23 Tom Scribner led a Field Trip along some side roads in the Jasper Mountain area looking for bluebirds and checking the boxes



for activity. It was a very windy day, but we still found thirteen **western bluebirds**. The scenery was beautiful and the wildflowers were abundant. Thanks Tom for a great trip.

Christopher Lindsey found a variety of shorebirds at the Blood Ponds on April 23 including **dunlin**, **semipalmated plover**, **long-billed dowitcher**, and **least sandpipers**.

MerryLynn saw a **loggerhead shrike** on Frog Hollow on April 23.

Linda Hanson reported the first **lazuli bunting** of the year at Bennington Lake on April 26.

MerryLynn found a migrant fallout at Bennington Lake on April 29—**Hammond's flycatcher**, **warbling vireo**, **Cassin's vireo**, **orange crowned**, **Nashville**, **yellow** and **yellow-rumped warblers** and **lazuli bunting**. She saw or heard 61 species!

This is the last issue of the *Magpiper* until fall, but summer birding is just beginning! I hope you have a great summer and see lots of birds. Let me know what you are seeing (housewren084@gmail.com) and we'll do a summer recap in the September issue. Also, be sure to send those photos to Judy for the Facebook page!

**LOOK FOR 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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