Membership Meeting—Thursday, January 16, 7 p.m. Olin Hall, Room 129

Eastern Washington’s disappearing sagebrush-steppe: causes, consequences, and a potential solution

The Columbia Basin was once an expanse of sagebrush steppe—a semi-arid landscape dominated by sagebrush and perennial bunchgrasses. This habitat is now largely relegated to the margins by cropland, and where it persists, it is often dramatically altered by the disappearance of once common plant and animal species and the arrival of new species. The novel ecosystems that are emerging may differ in important ways from earlier systems, and these differences may lead to further changes in these systems over time. Understanding how human activities influence these changes might allow us to adjust our activities to facilitate the persistence or return of ecosystem features we find desirable. For example, two of the largest human impacts on this ecosystem have been human-caused wildfires and over-grazing by domestic livestock. Because excessive livestock grazing can radically alter these systems, conservationists have generally viewed all livestock grazing as negative. However, moderate and targeted grazing can actually limit wildfire, and thus may actually be an effective tool for maintaining or even restoring sagebrush step ecosystems.
**Monthly Calendar**

**Board Meeting**
Jan. 9 at 7:00 P.M.

**Membership Meeting**
Jan. 16 at 7:00 P.M.

**Board of Directors**

**President:** Chris Howard  
**Vice President:** Jeff Fredson  
**Secretary:** Linda Hanson  
**Treasurer:** Jonathan Webster  
**Conservation:** Mike Denny  
**Education:** Kathy McConnell  
**Membership:** Melissa Webster and Holly Howard  
**Programs and Publicity:** Nancy Mitchell  
**Natural Area:** Tom Land  
**Bluebird Trails:** Tom Scribner  
**Adopt a Highway:** Larry Boe  
**Webmaster:** Kathy Howard  
**Facebook Admin:** Judy Treman  
**Field Trips:** Sue Parrish  
**Magpiper Layout:** Wendy Foster  
**Community Outreach:** Mike Denny  
**Member at Large:** Priscilla Dauble  
**Bird Sightings:** Ginger Shoemake

**Website:**
http://www.blumtn.org

**Bird sightings:**
housewren084@gmail.com

**Contact BMAS:**
Email: BlueMtnAudubon@gmail.com  
Mail: PO Box 1106  
Walla Walla, WA 99362

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**President’s Corner**

*By Chris Howard*

Now that it is officially winter we can look forward to snuggling into our warm houses and watching the birds on our backyard birdfeeders. Another option is to dress warmly and venture out into our wonderful natural environment and see what hardy birds have decided to spend the winter with us. We can expect to find the Chickadees, House Finches, Juncos, Flickers and Great Horned Owls. There are even Anna’s Hummingbirds at some backyard feeders. There is also the less frequent chance of finding a Great Grey or Snowy Owl in selected hiding places. There are the occasional Snow Buntings, Tundra Swans, and Evening Grosbeaks. While the paths around the Fort Walla Walla Natural Area and Bennington Lake may seem quiet compared to the frequent spring and summer bird melodies, the silence gives one increased gratitude when a flitting bird or a flock is spotted. Join Blue Mountain Audubon members for field trips every month and the Tuesday morning Bennington Lake bird walks. There is a new county bird list located on our website. Remember there is no such thing as bad weather only bad outdoor gear.

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**Blue Mountain Audubon Society**

**January 1 Walla Walla County Big Day**

*Help us break our record of 114 species found on New Year’s Day! Great way to start your 2020 year list of Birds!*

Just pick your favorite spot to bird and send your list to MerryLynn—or ebird your sightings. We need yard birds, water birds, mountain birds, raptors, etc. Will a BLUE JAY be spotted on January 1? We missed Steller’s Jay and Pine Siskin last January 1—maybe you will spot one?

You never know what you might find—maybe a Snow Bunting will visit.

Happy New Year,  
MerryLynn Denny  
(keeper of the Walla Walla County year list)
Saturday December 14th dawned cold and gray, yet 44 hardy birders set out for the 46th annual Christmas Bird Count. The 12 teams set out to canvas the Walla Walla area to find as many species as possible, and wow, some great birds were found! Sightings included four Pileated woodpeckers, 55 Yellow Rumped Warblers (both record numbers for the count). Another great find was Bohemian waxwings, which was a year bird for the county. Other relatively rare Christmas count finds were Purple Finch (for only the second time ever), Pine Grosbeak, Eastern Blue Jay, and Cackling Geese. All in all, 76 species were discovered. Afterwards, birders met at Fort Walla Walla for a wrap up of the count and a wonderful potluck dinner, where we were treated to several homemade soups, bread, salads, and desserts. Many thanks to all the sharp eyed birders who participated, and of course to MerryLynn and Mike Denny for organizing this fun annual event.

Blue Mountain Audubon Society

Field Trip
Birding Winter Wonderland

On January 18, Join Mike & MerryLynn on a quest to find winter birds such as Pine and Evening Grosbeak, Common Redpoll, Ruffed Grouse, Goshawk, Owls. Weather permitting we will drive and walk in the foothills east of Walla Walla.

The all day trip will leave the Whitman parking lot at 9 am and return around 3pm. Dress for the weather - wear appropriate footwear. Bring binoculars, hot drink and lunch. Must be able to walk a mile on gravel road which may be snow-covered, but often out of the fog and into the winter sunshine!
November 30th Trip North
by Sue Parrish

On November 30, sunny but chilly weather didn’t deter 24 people from following the Denny’s as they meandered north of Walla Walla, following back roads until reaching the parks and dams on the Snake river. As they travelled out Sudbury, Luckenbill and North Touchet roads, they found huge flocks of American Goldfinch and House finch. Red Tailed Hawks and Roughys were also spotted. Arriving at Fishhook Park, besides Pied Billed, Horned and Eared Grebes, 18 purple finches were found and a Great Horned Owl.

In Charbonneau Park, 300 Canada geese and 3 Bald Eagles were discovered. Hundreds of birds were encountered at Ice Harbor dam, with the highlights being 120 Common Goldeneye, 15 Barrows Goldeneye and a Peregrine Falcon. Finally at McNary NWR we saw a Prairie Falcon and an estimated 15,000 snow geese flew overhead. The sound was awe inspiring!

All in all, 59 species were seen, four which were falcons. Many thanks again for Mike and MerryLynn for leading another great day of birding in our amazing County.
Which Birds Do Children Recognize the Most?

By Kathy McConnell

When I was a child, I lived in a suburb that had been recently built on the stubble of an old cow pasture in Reno, Nevada. There were no trees at first and only streetlights for birds to perch on. We didn’t see many birds. We did recognize robins looking for worms in the new grass just like in our Dick and Jane readers. “See, see the bird.” “Oh yes, it is a robin!” And owls? We only heard owls in English fairytales for the streetlights kept them at bay. We knew ducks. We fed lovely quacking mallards white bread at the ponds in the city park.

I am often curious if kids now know more birds. At the Family Science Nights in the public schools, I often ask children what is their favorite bird or what birds do they know of? Almost every child has an answer. The rare child will natter on about great blue herons, red-tailed hawks, or Anna’s hummingbirds, but mostly the children mention magpies, owls they have heard in their yard, or (like me as a child) robins and mallards. If shown a chart of all of the birds found in North America, kids will point to a wider range of species that they recognize.

I’m going to guess that the difference between the child who knows a lot of birds and those that don’t is simply that the adults around that child “talks birds.” Calling attention to the sound of a chickadee or the distinctive flight of a flicker will communicate to a kid that they are interesting and worthy of their notice. To extend a child’s (and adult’s) skills there are a couple of neat games available.

One game is “Yotta Know Birds 88: North American Birds” by Yotta Corporation. I used to have this board game at The Kids’ Place, and it would attract both players and observers. At the pre-school level, it was essential to have an adult to help the children follow the rules, but older children or youth could play it themselves.

Secondly, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology offers a “Bird Spy Bingo Game” that can be used out on nature walks. The game challenges children to find such things as bird on a branch or even bird droppings! What child could resist this game?

Enjoy birding with a child or youth!
Musings

Battle of the Invasives

By Chris Howard

If you have walked around the Fort Walla Walla Natural Area in the spring or summer in the last couple of years you have most likely observed the very large and colorful plant named American Pokeweed (Phytolacca Americana). Pokeweed is hard to miss with a height of 4 to 10 feet and a width of 3 to 5 feet. What really sets it apart are the large leaves, the stout, smooth purplish stem that can be up to 2 inches in diameter and the showy purple-black berries. This plant first showed up at the Natural Area about 3 years ago and has taken over more and more territory each year. It dies back to its large taproot each winter and re-emerges each spring. The deep taproot makes it very hard to pull up. Pokeweed is native to the Southeast part of the U.S. It is now establishing itself across the country including the Northwest.

The spread of this plant from the Southeast is similar to the spread of the Eurasian Collared-Dove. This dove is native to India and also widespread in Europe. It was introduced in the Bahamas and spread to Florida. It is now very common in our area. The connection between the spread of the Pokeweed from the Southeast and the Eurasian Collared-Dove could be the fact that birds like the Collared-Dove love to eat the Pokeweed berries. The seeds pass through the bird and are deposited with a little fertilizer leaving a trail of new plants as they move north. So what is the problem with Pokeweed? The plant is persistent, aggressive and difficult to eradicate. It is also poisonous. The root, berries and seeds are especially poisonous. The effects can include diarrhea, vomiting, internal bleeding, rapid heartbeat, convulsions, and more, up to and including death. There are those, especially in the South, who claim that Pokeweed is an edible plant. They saute' the young leaves and stems after boiling them numerous times and pouring off the water. It is not a meal that is on my regular diet.

Another poisonous invasive that is found widespread in the Walla Walla valley is Poison Hemlock. This plant was originally brought to the United States from Europe to be a garden plant because of its attractive white flowers. All parts of the Hemlock plant are seriously poisonous. Poisoning occurs when the victim confuses the root with wild parsnips, the leaves with parsley or hemlock seed with anise seed. The Natural area was becoming overgrown with Poison Hemlock until two years ago when we had it sprayed. Although the spraying didn’t eradicate the Hemlock it did significantly decrease its territory.

With the elimination of Hemlock there seems to be a related proliferation of Pokeweed. The management of the invasives in the Natural Area is an ongoing effort.
In the Field
By Ginger Shoemake

Blue jays continued to be coming to backyard feeders and neighborhoods in December. I had reports from East Chestnut and Liberty Place in Walla Walla, Evans Street in College Place and Dayton where Glen Mendel had two of them the first week of December. He also had many other interesting birds coming to his feeders including Steller’s jays, mountain and black-capped chickadees, red-breasted nuthatches, pine siskins, lesser goldfinches, house finches and juncos.

MerryLynn Denny reported a variety of sparrows at the Millet Ponds on December 5 including five swamp sparrows, a Harris’s sparrow, two white-throated sparrows, a fox sparrow and a Lincoln’s sparrow. There were also large numbers of juncos, song sparrows and white-crowned sparrows.

It was another very successful Christmas Bird Count on December 14, with lots of participants, interesting birds, and a yummy wrap-up supper after the count. A special thanks to MerryLynn Denny for organizing this annual event.

The fog kept most of us from going out to look for birds much of December. However, it didn’t keep Mike and MerryLynn home! On December 15, while birding east of Walla Walla, they found three bohemian waxwings on Seaman Road and five gray-crowned rosy finches on Clancy Road.

On December 16, Mike and MerryLynn headed to Lower Monumental Dam to look for gulls and waterfowl. The gull numbers were huge and included a very rare slaty-backed gull, a lesser black-back gull (which is uncommon for Walla Walla County) and a Thayer’s gull (which has been renamed Iceland gull by the powers that be). Up from the dam on cliffs near the road they found seven gray-crowned rosy finches. On Magallon Road at dusk they spotted two short-eared owls.

Garth and Leslie Gissel took their grandsons Brayden and Elijah birding in the Natural Area on December 22. They found many black-capped chickadees and magpies along the trails. They also saw a hairy woodpecker and a Pacific wren.

Rodger and I were finally able to complete our two raptor routes by December 22. The persistent fog, rain and windy weather made it hard to find a good day earlier in the month. Our routes are north and west of Walla Walla, and north and west of Touchet. So far this year red-tailed hawks numbers are down considerably from last year, but American kestrel numbers are up. This seems to be the norm in Washington, Oregon and Idaho according to Jeff Fleischer, the project coordinator. We saw four bald eagles on the 22nd. Owls seen on the two routes were great horned owls and a barn owl. Other raptors seen were northern harriers, rough-legged hawks, merlins, a Cooper’s hawk and a sharp-shinned hawk. These routes are not as productive as the one we did several years ago in the Milton-Freewater area with Mike and MerryLynn Denny; but it’s still nice to get out and see what raptors are wintering in our neck of the woods.

Six of us walked Bennington Lake on Christmas Eve. The sun was out, the air was crisp and there were bird everywhere, especially robins. A red-winged blackbird was singing its spring song, Townsend’s solitaires were tooting from the treetops and black-capped chickadees chattered along the trail. However the highlight of the day was a magnificent adult northern goshawk that flew over us and landed in a tree where we were able to watch it for some time before it flew off. Mike Denny put a photo on the Blue Mountain Facebook page – check it out, it’s a beautiful bird!!

By the time you read this it will be 2020 and we will be starting a new year of birding. Have fun and don’t forget to email me with your sightings – housewren084@gmail.com HAPPY NEW YEAR!
Hooded Merganser
*Lophodytes cucullatus*
named by Ginger Shoemake

**Size:** 18 inches

**Description:** Small, thin-billed, long-tailed diving duck. The male has a black head with a large white fan-shaped patch behind its yellow eye that becomes a crest when puffed up. It has a white breast with diagonal black line. Flanks are brown and back is black with white bars on the wings. The female is grayish brown with a tawny brown crest and a white belly.

Hooded mergansers breed on secluded small lakes, ponds, swamps, and fast-flowing streams and rivers in wooded areas. They prefer to nest in tree cavities near water but will use nesting boxes if available and unoccupied. Their flight is swift and silent. They feed by diving and swimming under water to collect small fish, crustaceans and aquatic insects.

They are short distance migrants and winter wherever winter temperatures allow for ice free conditions on ponds, lakes, and rivers. During the winter they are usually found in pairs or small flocks. These beautiful ducks can be found quite regularly in the winter along Mill Creek near Rooks Park.

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Blue Mountain Audubon Society **Mission Statement:**

*Blue Mountain Audubon Society* (BMAS) objectives are to serve its membership and the larger communities of Southeastern Washington and Northeastern Oregon with goals to appreciate, conserve and enjoy birds, wildlife and the natural environment of the area. Education is a primary objective of our chapter activities. Through volunteer efforts BMAS provides educational opportunities, conservation activities and enjoyment of wildlife and wildlife habitat opportunities to members and the public.

*Blue Mountain Audubon Society* was organized in 1971 and chartered by National Audubon Society in 1972. BMAS is a non-profit 501c(3) organization. Find us on the internet at [www.blumtn.org](http://www.blumtn.org) or on Facebook.

**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

**Name:** __________________________________________

**Address:** __________________________________________

**City:** __________________________________________ State: __________ Zip Code: __________

**Phone:** __________________________ Email: __________________________________________