Blue Mountain Audubon Society

The Magnificent Image

Membership Meeting

Thursday, Feb. 20, 2019—7 p.m.
Olin Hall, Room 129, Whitman College

Winter Hills by Bill Rodgers

Waitsburg photographer, Bill Rodgers, will show some of his favorite landscape photographs of southeastern Washington and northeastern Oregon during his presentation. He will also share a few favorite scenes from the Colorado Plateau, Alaska, the Rocky Mountains, and Death Valley. Bill will describe the scenes, and share stories of the circumstances of some of the images shown, and will be available to answer questions about the creative philosophy and approach he employs while stalking what he calls “The Magnificent Image.”

Bill graduated from Whitman College in 1970 with a degree in Biology, and received his degree in Geology from the University of Washington in 1978. He has been an avid landscape photographer since 1969, when he bought his first “real” camera. After a career of ten years in the mining industry, and 30 years as an environmental consultant, Bill retired to the Walla Walla area and began full-time pursuit of a second career as a fine arts landscape photographer. Bill moved to Waitsburg in 2016, where he offers landscape photography workshops as the founder/owner of the Waitsburg School of Landscape Photography (www.WaitsburgSLP.com).

Bill’s work has hung in the Utah Museum of Natural History, and has been featured in Washington State Magazine, and The Waitsburg Times. He was the

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As I write these words, the temperature outside is 60 degrees. All vestiges of winter have melted away. Mill Creek is running high. While I can enjoy a short spell of early Spring weather I am very concerned about what is currently happening to the snow pack which was almost up to normal a week ago. Our membership meeting took place a week ago when there was a significant snowfall occurring. I was wondering if anyone would show up for the meeting considering the weather. At first there was only two of us. Then a few more trickled in and by meeting time the room was full. I think this is tribute to the hardiness of our local Audubon community. The winter field trip the next weekend was also well attended. It’s great to share a day of fresh air, some exercise, group comradery and 4 Northern Pygmy Owls. What more could a birder ask for?

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editor of Volumes 1 and 3 of Blue Mountain Land Trust’s landscape photography books titled “The Blues”, and one of the two Chief Photographers for Bob Carson’s magnificent contribution to “The Blues” series (Volume 4). Bill is currently working on Volume 5 of “The Blues”, which will focus on John Day area landscapes. Bill will be the featured artist at the Wenaha Gallery in Dayton next May.

Fall Hills by Bill Rodgers
Field Trip
Mill Creek Morning Walk
Saturday, February 22, 9:00 a.m.
Harper Joy Theatre Parking Lot

During the winter months a walk along Mill Creek can be interesting. After a short stop behind the old K-Mart store to scope for waterfowl, we’ll continue on to the Corp of Engineers Project Office parking lot where we’ll leave our cars and walk up to Rooks Park. Our target birds will be common merganser, hooded merganser, and great blue heron, but who knows what else might show up. (Mallards, and canada geese are a sure bet.) While walking through Rooks Park we’ll keep an eye out for Bewick’s wren, downy woodpecker, song sparrow, and hopefully other species such as a ruby crowned kinglet and pileated woodpecker.

Linda Hanson, Judy Treman and Ginger Shoemake will lead the trip. Dress for winter weather and join them for this HALF-DAY trip. If you have questions contact Ginger at housewren084@gmail.com

Winter Wonderland Field Trip
By MerryLynn Denny
Winter Wonderland Field Trip January 19, 2020 started out in cold fog but 20 hardy birders arrived to join in the fun. The first stop was up in the SUNSHINE on 7-Mile Rd just off Mill Creek Rd where an American Dipper serenaded us from the creek just below the bridge. Turkeys trotted down a driveway - talking as they went. A Northern Pygmy Owl perched in plain view for all to see. Pacific Wrens were skulking in the brambles and chatting away. Flyover Evening Grosbeaks were heard along with House Finches. On up Mill Creek to Kooskooskie where Kathy McConnell was kind enough to let the group use her cabin for a restroom break. With the fog rolling up we headed to Dixie and up Seaman Rd back in the bright sunshine and warm temps. During a nice walk up the hill we saw many American Robins and Cedar Waxwings—several Bohemian Waxwings were heard but not seen. Our second Pygmy Owl of the day stared down at us while being photographed. On up to the top for lunch in the sun with a great view of the snow-covered rugged mountains and the dense ocean of fog down in Walla Walla. Up Lewis Peak MerryLynn played Pygmy Owl and a mob of all three chickadee species came in to investigate along with a Brown Creeper. Coming back down out of the snow another Pygmy Owl was spotted along with a Northern Shrike. A few folks went back up Lewis Peak in search of more owls but none were found. But did spot 5 Pine Grossbeaks high up in a Tamarack tree. Enjoyed a gorgeous sunset until we had to go back down into the FOG.
“Find the pygmy owl, child. It’s there. See it? There in the tree.”

Some children would take the challenge and search gamely, others might shrug their shoulders and wonder if the adults are imagining things again. Such is the difficulty of birding with children. On our most recent field trip, Mary Lynn Denny spotted more than one pygmy owl and heard a number of birds that she could identify the moment they made a sound. Curious, I asked her how she acquired these skills. Her answer is one worth noting. She said that even as a very young child, she would hear a bird and go searching for whatever made the noise and in this way she came to connect bird sounds to birds. She also developed the skill of seeing either motion or shape and being able to identify the bird this way.

It seems obvious that there will be other children who have an aptitude, an ear, or an eye for birding like Mary Lynn’s. Let’s make sure if a kid with these capacities enters our circle of influence, we take extra care in nurturing their skills. Take them for walks to hang around ponds, and rivers, and gardens. Take them to choose bird seed and bird feeders and let them assist in mounting them. With the earth as it is now, we can’t afford to lose a single child to indifference.
Bird of the Month

Pileated Woodpecker

Dryocopus pileatus

by Ginger Shoemake

Size: 18 inches

Description: The roll of the pileated woodpecker is one of the most impressive sounds in nature, and among the noblest of spring, being most frequently heard on still, humid mornings when the air seems hungering to transmit sound....All the woodpecker tribe love to beat the tom-tom in such weather, but the stately roll of the pileated easily lords over it all. It is then as the gavel of the speaker calling the Whole House of Nature to order after the defection and chaos of winter.

These words were written by Ernest W. Vickers in 1915, but they resonate even today. When hiking recently with my birding friends in the Blue Mountains, we paused when someone said “did you hear that?” We all listened and there it was—the drum and the call of the pileated woodpecker. That’s birding at its best!

Pileated woodpeckers are the largest North American woodpecker (unless you believe that the ivory-billed woodpecker is not extinct) with a wing span measuring up to 32 inches. Their body is black with a small amount of white in the wing feathers that can be best seen when the bird is in flight. A large head is topped with a crimson red crest in both sexes. A black eye line and long pointed bill accentuate the face. The male’s red crown extends through the forehead to upper mandible showing as a red moustache. The moustache on the female is black.

Pileated woodpeckers can be found year round throughout the mountains and foothills in the Northwest and Canada as well as in most of the forested areas east of the Mississippi River. Their favorite foods are carpenter ants, wood-boring beetle larvae, termites and paper wasps. They have a long, barbed tongue and sticky saliva to assist in catching and extracting ants and insects. They excavate rectangular cavities in tree snags for their nest. Several excavations may be started each spring, some of which might be completed and used for nesting in later years. They may reuse the same tree in successive years for roost sites, but a new cavity is excavated each year for nesting. Pileated woodpeckers are monogamous and most likely mate for life. They share incubation and brooding duties but the males incubate and brood during the night. The young leave the nest cavity after about a month but stay in their parents’ territory for three to five months before they wander off to find mates and establish territories of their own.

If you are lucky you may find a pileated woodpecker at Rooks Park, Whitman Mission, along the Walla Walla River or on Mill Creek. It is a bird you won’t forget once you have heard it, but seeing it is the “frosting on the cake”.

Photo by Rodger Shoemake
**Musings**  
**Little Owls of the Blues**  
*By Chris Howard*

Any of the folks I regularly birdwatch with will tell you that I have a special fascination and attraction to owls. I love going out in the evenings looking for the Great Horned Owls, trying to solve the mystery of where they are establishing their nests and raising their young but I really get excited when I can observe the little owls that live in our area. The three most common little owls are the Northern Pygmy Owl, the Northern Saw-whet Owl and the Western Screech Owl.

On a recent winter field trip led by Mike and MerryLynn Denny, we were lucky to find four Northern Pygmy Owls. Pygmy Owls are 6.3 to 7.1 inches in length and weigh only 2.1 to 2.5 ounces. Their small size does not prevent them from being ferocious predators. Pygmy Owls are diurnal, hunting during the daylight hours which increases our chances of finding one. They are often quite openly exposed sitting motionless on the top of a conifer, and exposed branch or even on utility wire. Pygmy Owls are different from most other owls in that they lack the flat facial disc around the eyes and they don’t have the asymmetrical ear holes which are helpful in locating prey at night. It is thought that because they hunt in daylight they haven’t evolved those special features. Pygmy Owls wait silently carefully observing from their perch then quickly dive down upon unsuspecting prey. Even though they are not much bigger than a house sparrow they are known to take prey 3 times their size. Their diet consists of birds such Quail, Chickadees, Waxwings, Sparrows and other birds. During the summer their diet may include beetles, butterflies, crickets or reptiles such as lizards and skinks.

My other favorite little owl is the Northern Saw-whet. These owls are slightly larger than the Pygmy Owl but much harder to find. Saw-whets roost silently during the day hidden deep under the branches of low lying conifer branches or other overhanging shrubs. Their camouflage feather pattern allows them to blend into their surroundings. Like the Pygmy Owl, Saw-whets may be “mobbed” by other small birds such as Chickadees that sound an alarm of the owl’s presence trying to get them to leave. Following the sounds of the mobbing birds may lead one to the little owl. Saw-whet Owls feed mostly on deer mice by hunting them at night.

The Western Screech Owl is slightly larger than the Saw-whet and is also a nighttime hunter. The Screech Owl lives in holes in large deciduous trees often in suburban neighborhoods such as the one I live in. We often hear the soft trembling hoots of the Screech Owl on winter or spring evenings. They are opportunistic feeders eating small mammals, reptiles, birds and have even been seen scavenging roadkill.

Join us on our local bird walks and you may find a little owl!
In the Field
By Ginger Shoemake

On Christmas Day, Garth and Leslie Gissel walked Mill Creek from Myra to Gose and found a male wood duck, two great blue herons, two pairs of hooded mergansers and several mallards.

Mike and MerryLynn found a Eurasian wigeon and a long-tailed duck at Hood Park on December 27. There were also over a hundred wood ducks. There is a path that goes from the boat launch under the highway bridge to the other side, and this is where they were seen.

On December 27, Melissa Cummins was able to get out and enjoy the birds on a sunny day. On Ash Hollow she saw a prairie falcon and a Harlan’s red-tailed hawk. Up at McNary NWR she watched thousands of snow geese as they put on a spectacular display. You can watch a video she took on the Blue Mountain Facebook page.

Many of you went out on January 1 to look for New Year birds. The final total for the day according to MerryLynn was 108. Some of the highlights were ruffed grouse, American dipper, brown creeper, golden eagle, Clark’s grebe, trumpeter swan, gray-crowned rosy finch, Bohemian waxwing, and bluejay. You can find the full list on the Blue Mountain website in the “county checklist” link. She will keep the list updated as the year progresses. The total species recorded in the county in 2019 was 267.

Several of you let me know the first bird you saw for the New Year. Dark-eyed junco was the most common, but there were a few exceptions. MerryLynn had American wigeons as her first birds. They flew over her house at dawn. My first year birds were California quail. I went out early to put seed on the ground and replenish the feeders when several of them flew out of the fir tree where they had evidently been roosting overnight.

Sue and Jim Parrish still had two Anna’s hummingbirds coming to their feeder the first week of January. They also had a white-throated sparrow feeding with the white-crowned sparrows in their yard.

Only MerryLynn, Linda and Chris braved the snow on January 14 to walk Bennington Lake. They blazed the trails and found some nice birds including a northern shrike, two great horned owls, a long-eared owl, and a hairy woodpecker that has been around all winter.

What birds did you have in your yard during the snowy weather the 3rd week of January? Our feeders and the ground under them where we spread seed were busy every day. We saw watched a huge number of juncos, white-crowned sparrows, a large covey of quail, black-capped chickadees, a varied thrush, pine siskins, house finches, collared doves, song sparrows, American goldfinches, lesser goldfinches, house sparrows and of course a sharp-shinned hawk to keep them all on their toes!

RJ Baltierra found a small flock of purple finches at Fort Walla Walla Park on January 15. He also found a beautiful golden crowned kinglet and posted a photo of it on the Blue Mountain Facebook Page.

On January 19, Linda Hanson walked Mill Creek. She watched a bald eagle sitting in a tree emerge from the fog as she walked along. Also on the creek were common and hooded mergansers, a common goldeneye, a ring-necked duck, a great blue heron, mallards and canada geese. In Rooks Park she saw a varied thrush, robins, juncos and four yellow-rumped warblers.

Let me know what you are seeing. There’s still time for some interesting winter birds to show up. Email me at housewren-08@gmail.com
BLUE MOUNTAIN AUDUBON FACEBOOK PAGE

Quite a yard bird! Did you see Paul Treman’s photo of a Mountain Chickadee? 1,150 regular followers of BMAS Facebook Page did! Follow or like our Facebook page to see the latest bird sightings! You do not have to join Facebook to visit our page. Just Google “Blue Mountain Audubon Facebook” or go to: https://www.facebook.com/BlueMountainAudubonWallaWallaWa

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 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:______________________________________________