Rare Bird Sightings:  
What to do when you find a rare bird species

Presented by Mike Danny

This is a virtual event and the link will be posted on the Blue Mountain Audubon Society website at https://blumtn.org/ and also be emailed to the BMAS email list prior to the event.

Most of us are familiar with the Walla Walla County Pocket Field Checklist to Area Birds, a brochure available to area residents. The relative abundance of various species in the brochure are divided by seasons as well as designations such as Common (c), Uncommon (u), Occasional (o), or Rare (R). The designation of a rare species in one that has been recorded less than 5 times.

The anticipation of seeing a rare species in the region is in the mind of every birder whenever they are in the field, and yet, would you know what to do if you found a rare species?

Mike Denny, local birder expert and decades-long member of Blue Mountain Audubon Society, will talk about what to do when you spot a rare bird.

A graduate of Walla Walla University, Mike’s career has included serving as a Field Biologist for the U.S. Forest Service and as Riparian Restoration Coordinator for Walla Walla County and Pomeroy Conservation Districts. Most recently, Mike and photographer Daniel Biggs have been producing a multi-series program titled The Secret Life of the Forest for Blue Mountain Television.
Monthly Calendar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Date and Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Board Meeting</td>
<td>March 11—Virtual Meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual Membership Meeting</td>
<td>March 18, 7:00 p.m. PT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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- **Secretary**: Linda Hanson
- **Treasurer**: Jonathan Webster
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- **Member at Large**: Priscilla Dauble
- **Bird Sightings**: Ginger Shoemake

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President’s Corner

*By Chris Howard

Photos by Chris Howard*

Here we are in March and I think it is safe to say that spring is just around the corner. Walking around the Fort Walla Walla Natural area in the warm sun yesterday I heard the House Finches, Song Sparrows and Bewicks Wrens calling for mates. At Bennington Lake, there are at least two Great Horned Owls sitting on nests. This is the time to listen for the bugling call of the Sandhill Cranes passing overhead and the pounding of the Northern Flicker on whatever loud surface they find. It is time to get outside and watch for the spring migration happening right before your very eyes. On your morning walk, see if you can find one new spring item every day. Look for the buds coming out on the trees, new insects emerging and maybe even the croak of a frog. The Snow Drops, Crocuses, Hellebore and other early bloomers are adding color to walks in town and in nature. There is around 10 feet of snow up in our Blue Mountains that we hope will slowly melt bringing moisture into the streams and rivers for the salmon and steelhead as well for the irrigation of local crops. Blue Mountain Audubon will be continuing our virtual membership meeting every third Thursday and weather permitting there is a Bennington Bird walk every Tuesday morning at 8:00 am. All are invited.
Warmer weather, greener hills, and longer days all mean it’s time to take a day trip to find Sandhill Cranes. Watching these giant, prehistoric birds come in for a graceful landing as they give their loud creaking calls to each other is an experience never forgotten. Here are several areas within a 1-hour drive where they are usually found during March.

First and foremost, is Othello, which is famous for its annual Sandhill Crane festival. Although the festival is virtual this year, you can still hop in your car and head up there for an adventure on your own. To get to Othello, take Hwy 395 north from Pasco, then Hwy 17 to Mesa. This will lead you past Scooteny Reservoir, which is a good place to stop and look for not only cranes, but waterfowl and shorebirds. Also investigate a few miles of Paradise Rd, which runs east up a hill immediately across Hwy 17 from Scooteny. There are often cranes in the cornfields on both sides of the road.

Continue north on Hwy 17 and once in Othello area, head for McManamon road, which is west and north of Othello. To get there, turn left off of off 17 onto Cunningham/Main Street. Turn right onto Broadway, which becomes McManamon. So many roads to explore in the area! One choice is to head north on S. Morgan Lake road which leads to areas that often have many cranes. An overlook found by turning R when you reach a T is especially good. Or you can stay on McManamon Rd, heading west for several miles and then turning L onto Barton Rd. This heads south towards Royal Lake. Take a R on Grant and then then L on Byers. There are often of Cranes here as you overlook Royal Lake. Continue on Byers road which becomes Road 14.8. At the intersection with Road D SE turn L which will connect you to Hwy 26. Turn L and you’ll be heading back to Othello. Check out any cornfields, which cranes love, as well as the potholes along the highway. Besides waterfowl, there are often Stilts and Avocets to be found. For more info, contact the Crane Festival at 509-989-5606, or Facebook as Othello Sandhill Crane Festival, or othellosandhillcranefestival.org. And thanks to MerryLynn Denny for the above detailed directions to her hot spots.

A closer spot to find Cranes is in the W Richland area along Snively Rd. To get there take the Hwy 240 exit off Highway 12 in Richland. Continue on Hwy 240 past Horn Rapids Golf Course to Twin Bridges Road. Turn L onto Twin Bridges and continue west to N Snively Road. Turn R onto Snively and drive slowly through the corn fields and there should be tons of cranes. Make sure to roll down the windows, as hearing cranes is as fun as seeing them.

Last but not least, check out the Ladd Marsh area SE of LaGrande. From Foothills Road east of town off of I84, cranes can usually be spotted in the marsh below. Or head to the other side of the highway and walk through the paths of the marsh. Either way, there should be not only cranes but lots of interesting waterfowl. So get out there and enjoy the wonder of cranes. Good Luck!
March Arrivals

By Ginger Shoemake

It’s time to start watching for our spring and summer birds to return. Some are just passing through, but most of them nest here. It’s always exciting to see new birds, and especially this year after our winter weather in February. Here are some of the birds you may encounter.

**Turkey vulture** – pass through on their way to the mountains

**Sandhill crane** – pass through on their way to nesting grounds in the far northern parts of Canada and Alaska. A small population does nest in Eastern Oregon.

**Long-billed curlew** - can usually be found on Riggs Road south of Touchet.

**Caspian tern** – look for them at the Walla Walla River Delta

**White-throated swift** - look for them over the cliffs in Wallula Gap and at Palouse Falls State Park

**Say’s phoebe** – a few have been spotted this winter, but most show up in March or later

**Tree Swallow** – Bennington Lake is always a good place to find all of the swallows

**Violet-green swallow**

**Cliff swallow**

**Mountain and western bluebird** – several wintered over this year, but don’t forget to look for them on Jasper Mountain Road in the spring

**Yellow-rumped warbler** – a few wintered here, but more will be coming through this month

**Lincoln’s sparrow**

**Savannah sparrow**

**Fox sparrow** – you can hear their beautiful song if you walk along South Fork Coppei Creek

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### Arthur G. Rempel

**Fort Walla Walla Natural Area**

By Chris Howard

The Natural Area, a city park maintained by Blue Mountain Audubon, is a great place to watch the seasons change. Right now the trails are as open as can be since the abundant snow last month beat down the blackberries and giving a long distance view. On March 6 we will be having a work party in collaboration with the Blues Crew of the Blue Mountain Land Trust. The goal is two-pronged. One group will be repairing the stairs on the stairway trail and a second group will be working on spreading chips on the trails. The Natural Area is an urban oasis which is an especially great place for families to bring children on nature explorations. One of great things about the Natural Area is the way it changes so dramatically with each season. It is wide open now and in the middle of the summer it will shady and cool even with the hot summer sun. In this next month the spring migrants will be returning and bird songs will fill the air.
Musings
Natural Beauty

By Chris Howard

There are many of us that are enraptured by the natural beauty we see around us every day. There are some days when the magnificence of nature is so spectacular it fills my heart and leaves me in stunned in silent appreciation. Such was case on an evening in early February. The sun was setting through a scattering of clouds which always makes for the most picturesque sunsets. I left the parking lot at Bennington Lake and made my way across the mud flats to the trail that circles the lake. As I came around to the east side of the lake, the sky had turned to a dazzling red, orange, pink combination that reflected in the lake water. Ducks and geese paddled through the fiery ripples with the Widgeons squeaking in delight and the Mallards laughing joyfully. As the sun reached the horizon, a myriad of geese circled the lake honking plaintively as their as their flock mates on the lake clamored a welcome to them. There seemed to be an unending number of geese and ducks splashing down into the orange pool.

Continuing around the lake I looked to the east to see the Blue Mountains shift from blue and green to pastel pink. The clouds changed to flaming banners as flock after flock of honking geese flew over overhead close enough to hear the throbbing of their wingbeats. Hiking through the lakeside cottonwoods with darkness slowly descending, I stopped upon hearing the clear calls of coyotes yipping in exaltation. How could they not be excited by the beauty of this sunset? Returning to the parking lot, I looked up into the cottonwood trees to see two Great Horned Owls in the same tree. The male was bent over with its tail feathers in the air giving a deep, resonating HOOO HOOO/HOO HOO. The female called back with a higher call of hooo, hooo, hoo, hoo. This was definitely a mated pair. After hooting a few times the female swooped across the parking lot into the hole in the cliff.

As I was standing there in the early evening darkness slowly taking in the gift of this magnificent day, wondering what else could happen, I looked up and spotted the I.S.S. (international space station) slowly streaking across the night sky. It was as if to say “don’t forget us humans, we are special too!”
In the Field
By Ginger Shoemake

Mike and MerryLynn searched for owls on February 7 and finally found a *northern saw-whet owl* and a *long-eared owl* at Charbonneau Park.

On February 8, MerryLynn found two *California scrub jays* and four *bluejays* on Hanson Road in Touchet. The bluejays were flying east from the river over into the trees, so they are probably the same ones Melissa Cummins has had at her feeders for several months since she lives just west of the river.

Birding was rather slow for the Tuesday Bennington Lake walkers on February 9, but they did see a *northern shrike* and a *Townsend’s solitaire*. Also, the *great horned owl* is at her nest parking lot bank.

Linda Hanson and I walked Rooks Park on February 10. One of the first birds we saw was a *varied thrush*. We flushed a *great blue heron* from the pond and we saw a few *song sparrows*. There was one *male hooded merganser* and two *mallards* on Mill Creek. As we were walking through the park, we flushed about 30 *California quail* and a flock of 50 or so *Canada geese* flew overhead. As we were leaving we heard a persistent chip which turned out to be a *fox sparrow*.

On February 13, Pam Fisher had three *Cassin’s finches* come to her feeders looking for something to eat during the snow. She also has had a *yellow-rumped warbler* hanging around her heated water feature.

On February 13, a friend of MerryLynn’s sent her a photo of a *western screech owl* that spent the day huddled on a recreational vehicle in College Place. It finally flew off at dusk, but with the heavy snow it probably was having difficulty finding anything to eat.

I imagine those of you who feed birds had a big influx of bird activity during the snow storms Valentine’s weekend. I know we did – over 100 birds at one time including 25 *lesser goldfinches*. Yellowhawk Creek was partially frozen and the little birds took advantage of the ice to dip their beaks for a drink of water - usually, they stand on the rocks along the side to drink.

Elbert Hardin came across a pair of *pileated woodpeckers* while walking through a snowy Rooks Park on February 15.

Mike and MerryLynn drove north of Walla Walla on February 19 and were rewarded with some really nice birds. There were hundreds of *horned larks* along the roads and they were able to spot a *Lapland longspur* in with a flock on Eureka Flat Road. It had begun to get its breeding plumage, so stuck out in the flock. They saw *gray partridges* on Smith Springs Road just west of Piper Canyon Road and *gray crowned rosy finches* going to roost at an elevator on Lyons Ferry Road. Great birding in the snow. The next day, Bob Hanson took a photo of one of them in a snowbank near the elevator, and while he was taking the photo one landed on the car window next to Linda!

On February 20, Bonnie Roemer watched a *short-eared owl* hunting on Luckenbill Road.

Chris Howard found a *northern saw-whet owl* at Rooks Park on February 21. He showed it to Linda Hanson and I the next day but it was hidden in the branches so he wasn’t able to get a good photo. While we were birding the park, Linda spotted a *great blue heron* sitting on a snag over the pond and Chris was able to get this great photo. It looks like an old man with a beard!
Bob and Mary Betz saw two sandhill cranes and 50 tundra swans at the Walla Walla Junction Overlook pond on February 24. They were returning after a day of birding north of Walla Walla and said seeing the cranes was a surprise find at the end of a beautiful day.

MerryLynn reported over 70 dunlins among the many gulls and ducks at the Walla Walla river Delta on February 24. Her complete report from that location and other locations she visited that day can be found on ebird.

March is the beginning of migration. Email me to let me know what you are seeing! Send your sightings to housewren084@gmail.com

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

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