



Winter Birds in NCW

Volume 45 #5 February 2012
compiled by Teri J Pieper, Methow Valley

So far the winter of 2011-2012 has been a good one for birders. The best Christmas present for some birders was a highly unexpected Ross's Gull at Palmer Lake in northern Okanogan County! I was at the December 17th Bridgeport Christmas Bird Count dinner when the first photos of this rare bird were shared. A Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife Biologist, Jeff Heinlein, was the first to spot and tentatively identify this pink colored gull. It is a small gull with a diminutive bill and rarely seen outside of the Arctic. It's about the prettiest gull I can think of. A positive ID was made within a day or two and word spread among birders. It is amazing how many people can drop everything and travel to the far reaches of the state during the week before Christmas. Some were even there on Christmas day! For many birders, it was a six hour drive requiring overnight stays in the Okanogan. This type of rare bird sighting really illustrates the economic implications involved in birding.

In December I reported on the irruption of Snowy Owls throughout the northern US. This pattern is continuing and almost anyone who puts some effort into the search can be rewarded with exciting views of this spectacular bird. Many of the owls that are being seen are heavily barred or



Ross's Gull at Palmer Lake
photo by Gregg Thompson

streaked with black markings. This generally indicates a young bird and leads to speculation that perhaps this was an excellent breeding year so the young have had to travel farther afield to find winter food. I was lucky enough to see two of them in the Okanogan and I see from the Tweeters list-serv that Snowy Owls



Snowy Owl - this shows the heavy barring on the front of the bird.
photo by Teri J Pieper

continue to be reported around the Waterville Plateau. Other good spots to see this species are Ocean Shores on the Washington coast and Boundary Bay, just north of the Canadian border, also on the coast.

Other interesting winter birds being observed include Gyrfalcons, Snow Buntings,

Bohemian Waxwings, Common Redpolls, Northern Hawk-owls and Gray-crowned Rosy-finches.

Editor's note - for a first person account of the Ross's Gull sighting, see Jenny Graevell's article on page 5. On page 7 there is an article about the economic impact of this one small pinkish gull.

Want to get out and learn more about the winter birds of our region? Dr. Dan Stephens, Wenatchee Valley College biology professor, will be leading a field trip to the Waterville Plateau on February 11th. To RSVP for this outing, please call Dan at 679-4706. Be prepared for cold weather and bring your optics and bird books; lunch, snacks and water; maybe something hot to drink too. The trip will meet at the Easy Street Park and Ride in Wenatchee at 8:00 a.m. and should return there about 4:30

The mission of the
North Central Washington Audubon Society
 is "to conserve and restore natural ecosystems,
 focusing on birds and their habitats, for the benefit of
 people and the biological diversity of
 North Central Washington."

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All phone numbers in the Wild Phlox are area code 509 unless otherwise indicated.

Finding a Lifer!

For some of us, birding is a passionate pursuit. For others, it could be an obsession (think back to the movie, The Big Year). However I think we all celebrate when we see a new species – a life bird. Local birder, Janet Millard sent me this photo of a Great Gray Owl from Homer Alaska. It was a much pursued lifer for her. She says "I of course, freaked out. Squealing, clawing at the glass, hopping in my seat, trying to get unbuckled. I think I actually forgot how to use a door handle for a moment, I know I forgot I was wearing binocs. Forrest calmed me down, reminded me that my squealing might scare off the bird. I unbuckled, open the door, spilled out of the rig, and stared at my find. Forrest and Merry got to see what it means for Janet to "come completely unglued". Thanks for sharing your experience Janet.



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What is it about winter birding that I find so interesting? Is it because these winter visitors are unpredictable and I never know what might show up? Is it because they seem to be easier to see without the cover of foliage everywhere? Is it just the brisk weather and snow-covered scenery that I really like? Whatever it is, I do enjoy searching for the winter specialties described in our front page article. What I don't like is that it often requires driving, lots of driving and lots of fuel. This winter, I've been delighted to see Common Redpolls at our feeders. For the last couple of weeks they have been daily visitors with the flock size growing daily. I search through the birds in hopes of finding the uncommon Hoary Redpoll but so far, no luck. The Redpolls were here in November when winter first appeared and then moved on, returning with January's cold and snowy weather. They usually arrive with the American Goldfinches in the first light of morning and they completely swarm over one of the nyger thistle sock feeders. Some will forage on the ground with the Dark-eyed Juncos and goldfinches. There is also a flock of Red-winged Blackbirds that apparently forgot to migrate out of the valley. Or maybe they came from somewhere else and decided to stay. These were the ONLY Red-winged Blackbirds on the Twisp Christmas Bird Count. The redpolls and other finches do not like the blackbirds and flee when the bigger noisy birds arrive.

David St. George reports that the Grand Coulee CBC, while low on counters, species and birds, had new high counts with 30 Double-crested Cormorants, 39 Eurasian Collared-Doves and 12 Great Horned Owls. Steve Easley with the Chelan CBC says they also had a lower than average number of species even though they added three new species to the count – Wild Turkey, Snow Goose and Virginia Rail. Additionally they found an unusual Northern Hawk Owl (this bird is still being seen in the Union Valley area). The Twisp CBC added one new species to their count – a White-throated Sparrow. 24 counters counted 68 species which ties the highest species count for Twisp. Unusual winter species were Ring-necked Pheasant, Wood Duck, Western Screech Owl, Three-toed Woodpecker and Dusky Grouse.

Another favorite winter activity for many people is planning trips to warmer climates and this year Ken and I are doing just that. In April we will be going to the east coast traveling by car from Virginia to Florida and spending a week at Sanibel Island, home of the famous Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge! We hope to see many birds, visit other NWR's and enjoy some cultural highlights of the southeast. Do you have suggestions for can't miss locations in that region?



Common Redpolls at a thistle feeder
photo by Teri J Pieper

Birds volunteer to be counted in the upcoming Great Backyard Bird Count

by Mark Oswood, Wenatchee

Birds all across North Central Washington have signed up to be seen by bird watchers in the Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC), coming February 17-20. Are you a Power Birder, able to casually identify immature gulls while speed skating on icy winter lakes? No? That's OK! The GBBC is low-velocity and meant for birders of all skill levels. You pick your own location to count birds (for at least 15 minutes). You can do more than one count in a day, if you are counting at different locations and you can do counts on any or all of the four days of the GBBC. There are simple rules for counting birds and you need to have some easy-to-get information for each of your counts. If your birding experience is limited, chances are that you'll see birds that you can't identify. That's fine! One of the questions you'll answer for each of your counts is whether you identified all the birds you saw.

The GBBC is especially suited for stay-at-home bird watchers. Your seen-from-your-window count of birds at your backyard feeders is just as needed as a count done by a submarine birder, counting pelagic birds through a periscope.

The GBBC website, www.birdsource.org/gbbc/ has instructions, downloadable checklists of birds for your location, and help for bird identifications. After you've done your counts, you enter your data at the GBBC website.

If you are completely non-digital but would like to do the GBBC, just contact me at NCWAS. I'm happy to send you a paper version of the GBBC.

For more information and inspiration, please see the full-color insert in this issue.

Bald Eagle Field Day in the Methow

article and photos by
Kim Romain-Bondi, Mazama

On Saturday, January 7th, a group of enthusiasts headed out to observe and learn about wintering Bald Eagles in the Methow Valley. Libby Mills and Kim Romain-Bondi led a field trip to observe the *white-headed fish-crows* along the Methow River and to discuss eagle conservation. The highlight was seeing fifteen eagles of various ages at the confluence of the Methow River and Spring Creek, in the town of Winthrop near the new pedestrian bridge. There were many opportunities to age juveniles; one-year olds with dark feathers and dark eyes, and four to five-year olds with mottled bodies, wings and head. The end of the coho salmon run was making its way from the Methow River into Spring Creek spawning grounds (and the state and federal fish hatcheries). We also observed Mallards and Common Mergansers in



Happy Bald Eagle viewers

the shallows of the river, all favorite foods of the eagles this time of the year. At the Big Valley Wildlife Area, the group observed another favorite food for Bald Eagles and other scavengers, road-killed deer that had been freshly scavenged by coyotes, eagles, and corvid species including Common Ravens and Black-billed Magpies.



Four-year old Bald Eagle glares down at the Methow River

Notes from Mazama

It is January 20th. Twelve degrees, with over a foot of new snow on the ground, sure beats the sub-zero wind chills of the past two days I endured as I plowed snow. The chipmunks must be cached in a warm place for the duration and less of the abundant squirrel population is running around.

That topic takes me back a month when I put up the annual outside Christmas tree, complete with decorations for us and the birds and other animals. Only about four feet tall, I found one with a bushy bottom under which to toss bird and squirrel chow. And it being the season, decorated it with a few baubles along with suet. This year I hung a few balls on the tree and needed more hangers. There were maybe four balls hung when I returned with paper clip hangers, and there was a squirrel that had a bright green glass ball three inches in diameter off the tree. When it saw me, it scampered to the edge of the deck with the ball in its mouth, where it lost control of its booty which then rolled down the snow bank and

onto the frozen pond. The little rodent pursued it, chattering loudly, and ran across the ice and into the brush without its treasure.

We began snow season with three California quail and the flock has now doubled in size. Ms. Gloria puts seed under the tree as well as beneath a large round table. The quail seem to have some frightening attributes to other birds, even Steller's jays. When they are feeding the jays back off. The quail seem quite oblivious to the intruders.

Here's a tip for a great bird feeder, especially for photographers. Get a piece of mature pine bark and cut it into a slab a foot or so long and maybe 8 inches wide (this is NOT rocket science). Drill a hole in the top center for a hanger and thread it with heavy monofilament. Hang it from a tree branch, fill the crevices with a mix of peanut butter, suet and seeds. All the birds love it, the jays have yet to find the proper footing but

photo and article by Bob Spiwak, Mazama

the woodpeckers and their ilk along with chickadees and nuthatches hang on and devour the mix. I mentioned photography because if placed against a natural background and filling the lens it looks quite as though it belongs, unlike many feeder pictures. And, hung far enough from the tree trunk with a dangle of two to three feet it defeats squirrels as well.

That's it for this month. Another foot of snow is on the way. Does it beat mosquitoes, yellow jackets and rattlesnakes? The jury is still out on that one.



Northern Flicker

We Get Mail

Enjoying Wildlife in Suburban East Wenatchee

December 16, 2011

Dear NCW Audubon Society,

We derive much pleasure living on Sand Canyon and watching all the birds here. We own ½ mile of the canyon on the north side and have planted over forty dogwood trees on the canyon. They are beautiful when in bloom in the spring; also beautiful when they leaf out in green and then beautiful in the fall when their leaves turn purple and red and are loaded with berries, which the birds love. We love to listen to them squabbling over the dogwood fruit. Some of the birds we see are American Robins, Varied Thrushes, American Goldfinches (we feed them all year) House Finches, Dark-eyed Juncos and various sparrows; Stellers Jays (we put acorns and peanuts in a feeders) and squirrels too. There is a female Downy Woodpecker on our suet feeder every spring and winter – don't know if it is the same one or not. Sometimes we also see the male Downy. We have heard Pine Siskins in the canyon in the pine and fir trees we planted. There have been Screech Owls on our shop roof and a Great-horned Owl too. Also, we see Mountain Chickadees in the canyon. We have hummingbirds in summer when my agastaches bloom. There are Northern Flickers, especially in the fall when the dogwoods have berries. I have never been able to get an accurate count of the California Quail we feed (they move around too much) but I'm sure it's over fifty in the winter. Every spring the canyon is invaded by a large flock of Evening Grosbeaks.

Oh, almost forgot we have an immature Coopers Hawk

here this fall – when the birds disappear, we know the hawk is near. Your members are always welcome here to enjoy the birds. We did have coyotes, but I think someone shot them. One spring a pair had five pups just below our house. It was so funny, when a siren sounded – all seven coyotes would start yapping and howling and our



Canyon Visitor
original watercolor by Lila Putnam

Airedale would start howling too. We have really enjoyed living here for almost eight years now – we had an apple orchard here before. We would like to attend the Chelan Ridge Hawk Watch some fall.

All in all there is much wildlife to enjoy here.

Sincerely

George and Lila Putnam

Siberian Rarity

In mid-December, a very rare Siberian gull was found by biologist Jeff Heinlen, on Palmer Lake, just outside of Loomis. This beautiful, petite tern-like bird has only been recorded once before in Washington - at McNary Dam in 1994. As the news of the gull spread, birders from all parts of the northwest and beyond, converged on Palmer Lake, just outside of Loomis. On December 22, Meredith Spencer, Ralph and Betty Hagenbuch and I, made the trip. The location of the gull on the lake was easy to find, due to all the cars parked along the roadway and the kaleidoscope of cameras, tripods, binoculars and grinning, ecstatic faces. Close to thirty people were present. The majority of them on that day were from British Columbia, with a few from Spokane and the Seattle area. One delighted man from BC was heard to say he waited fifty years to see this bird! Another birder from Tucson, Arizona claimed that the Ross's Gull was the 600th bird on his life list. Jerry and Francie Ogle, owners of the local Quik Stop in Loomis, estimated that hundreds of people added this mega-rare species to their life list from December 15 through December 29th. The store owners collected signatures from people in their guest book from as far away as New York, Georgia and Arizona. The Ross's Gull has not been seen since December 29th, 2011.

article and photo by Jenny Graevell, East Wenatchee



Owls and Woodpeckers of the Okanogan Highlands and Beyond

article by Julie Ashmore, Okanogan Highlands
photo by Paul Bannick

On Friday, February 3rd, Paul Bannick will adapt his renowned “Owls and Woodpeckers” presentation to “the Okanogan Highlands and Beyond,” and will take us on a visual and auditory exploration of local habitat types, through the owls and woodpeckers that most define and enrich these places. His photographic field report will celebrate the ways in which the lives of these two iconic birds are intertwined with one another, and will explore their role as keystone and indicator species for their environment. The Highland Wonders audience will be immersed in the sights and sounds of forest, grassland, and desert, and in the entertaining and informative details of Paul’s narrative. The hidden life of these birds is obvious for those who know how to find it. Paul knows how to find it, and how to bring it to life for his audiences through photos, sound, and story.

Paul Bannick is a wildlife photographer specializing in the natural history of North America with a focus on birds and habitat. Coupling his love of the outdoors with his skill as a photographer, he creates images that foster the intimacy between viewer and subject, inspiring education and conservation.

“These two bird groups are linked by the fact that more than half of the owl species in North America rely on woodpeckers for their nest cavities, in some way,” Paul says. He photographs woodpeckers and owls in hopes of drawing attention to the challenges facing these birds and their ecosystems. “Many woodpeckers and owls are considered indicator species,” he explains. “These are species that depend upon critical elements of a natural system and are most sensitive to degradation of those elements. Because of this, the health of an indicator species population can be used to monitor the health of a natural system.”

Paul’s work can be found in bird guides from Audubon, The Smithsonian, Stokes, The National Wildlife Federation, and in the Handbook of the Birds of the World. His work has been featured in a variety of publications from Audubon, Sunset, Birds and Blooms, Pacific Northwest (two cover

stories), Seattle Times, Alaska Air Magazine, and in many other books, magazines, parks, refuges, and other outlets in North America and Europe. He has appeared on dozens of NPR stations and programs, including Travels with Rick Steves and BirdNote. This Highland Wonders presentation is an opportunity to benefit from Paul’s countless hours observing owls and woodpeckers, sometimes spending hours moving inch by inch into the right position while watching a bird’s behaviors, movements and the path of the sun. All of Paul’s photos are of wild subjects, and all images are faithful, unaltered representations of the natural

moment.

The exciting Highland Wonders lineup in the months to come includes Bats, Bighorn Sheep and Butterflies. The Highland Wonders educational series features the natural history of the Okanogan Highlands and surrounding areas. OHA’s Education Program is designed to build the capacity of the community to steward



natural habitats and resources, by helping to develop an informed and empowered population.

The educational series is offered by Okanogan Highlands Alliance, free of charge, as part of the Community Cultural Center (CCC) of Tonasket Friday coffeehouse. Dinner benefiting the CCC begins at 5:00 pm, and the presentation begins at 6:30 pm with desserts, tea and coffee. The indoor events are held at the CCC, at 411 S Western Avenue, Tonasket, and details are provided on OHA’s website: www.okanoganhighlands.org/education.

OHA is a non-profit that works to educate the public on watershed issues. For more information, email julie@okanoganhighlands.org or call 433-7893. The public can provide input on the topics addressed by OHA’s education program by filling out the following survey: <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/PB6N3GF>.

The next Highland Wonders presentation will happen March 2. “Bats of the Okanogan Highlands” will be presented by Roger Christophersen of the North Cascades National Park. Dinner is at 5:00 and the program at 6:30 at the CCC of Tonasket. For more information call 433-7893 or email julie@okanoganhighlands.org

The Economic Impact of One Small Bird

Adam Sedgley, Seattle, did an online survey of Tweepers, a Pacific Northwest birding list-serv asking people about their trips to see the Ross's Gull. He received 82 responses. The bird was first spotted on Thursday, December 15th and reported to Tweepers on Tuesday, December 20th. It was last seen a week later on Tuesday December 27th.

- 95% of respondents traveled to this region specifically to see the Ross's Gull (58% went to only see the bird, 37% made an extended trip out of it. 5% were already in the area or planning to go to the area).
 - The average distance traveled by respondents was 501 miles (round trip).
 - The average group size of respondents was 2.3 people.
 - The date when most respondents tried for the gull was morning of Friday, December 23rd and the average respondent stayed at Palmer Lake just under 3 hours (2:52).
 - Number of people survey represents: 191.
 - Total number of birdwatchers present at Palmer Lake over period (12/19-12/29 - estimated by respondents): 382.
 - Average amount of money spent on the trip: \$56.66 per person (which could include gas, food, lodging, and souvenirs).
 - Total estimated amount of money spent: \$21,644*.
- * Many specified that most of their money was spent on

gas, which wouldn't necessarily be in the immediate local economy. This was calculated by multiplying [Total Estimate of Birdwatchers Present at Palmer Lake] by [Average \$ Spent per Person]. Adam says "I am not a statistician nor have I ever done an economic impact analysis; I am sure there are more robust ways to complete this analysis. This is my back of the napkin calculation."

Points of Origin (from survey and second hand reports from respondents): British Columbia: Burnaby; Chilliwack; Delta; Kelowna; Langley; Nelson; Okanagan; Oliver; Penticton; Surrey; Vancouver; Vernon. Washington State: Acme; Auburn; Battle Ground; Bellevue; Bellingham; Bothell; Brewster; Bridgeport; Cle Elum; Colville; Edmonds; Enumclaw; Everett; Federal Way; Issaquah; Kirkland; Lake Forest Park; Leavenworth; Longview; Lyman; Lynnwood; Mercer Island; Moses Lake; Okanogan; Olympia; Omak; Poulsbo; Puyallup; Quilcene; Redmond; Renton; Richland; Rosedale; Seattle; Spokane; Stanwood; Sunnyside; Tacoma; Tonasket; Tri-cities; Vancouver; Walla Walla; Wenatchee; Winthrop; Woodinville; Yakima. Oregon: Astoria; Portland. Other Points of Origin: Arizona (Tucson); Calgary; California (Sacramento); Colorado; Indiana (Fort Wayne); Missouri (already visiting WA); Montana (Missoula); Utah (already visiting WA).

What's Coming up at the Wenatchee River Institute at Barn Beach Reserve

by Gail Roberts, Plain

February 10, 7 pm, in the Barn
"Cottonwood and the River of Time: On Trees, Evolution, and Society"
Dr. Reinhard Stettler, Professor Emeritus of Forestry at the University of Washington, comes to the Barn to give a presentation featuring his book, *"Cottonwood and the River of Time."* With a lifetime of work in forestry and genetics to guide him, Dr. Stettler celebrates both what has been learned and what still remains a mystery as he examines not only cottonwoods, but trees in general, their evolution, and their relationship to society. In partnership with A Book for All Seasons.

February 17, 7 pm, in the Barn
"Working in the Northwest Woods"
Presentation by author Dennis Willard of his first-hand account of a decade spent in the outdoors in the mountains of the Pacific Northwest. You will hear gripping accounts of encounters with

wild weather, wild fire and wildlife, as this author takes you on a journey into the backcountry. In partnership with A Book For All Seasons.

February 24, 2012, 7 PM, in the Barn
"Play Again: What Are the Consequences of a Childhood Removed from Nature?"

The second offering in our winter "Films in the Barn" series. At a time when children play more behind screens than outside, this movie explores the changing balance between the virtual and natural worlds. This emotionally moving and humorous documentary follows six teenagers who, like the "average American child," spend five to fifteen hours a day behind electronic screens. *Play Again* unplugs these teens and takes them on their first wilderness adventure - no electricity, no cell phone coverage, no virtual reality. *Play Again* investigates the

consequences of a childhood removed from nature and encourages action for a sustainable future. Suggested donation: \$5.

March 2, 7 PM, in the Barn
"Foodways and Byways: The Story of Food in North Central Washington"
The third offering in our winter "Films in the Barn" series. What can we learn from the past that can help us build strong local food systems today? This is the question that the Initiative for Rural Innovation & Stewardship (IRIS) explores in the recently released video, *"Foodways & Byways: The Story of Food in North Central Washington."* Through a tapestry of music, video and photographs viewers hear from oldtimers what worked and from young people why it matters. First-hand interviews show how growing, harvesting and sharing food strengthens community and family bonds. In partnership with IRIS.

February Wild Phlox

North Central Washington Audubon Society

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North Central Washington Audubon Society Calendar

February 3	Paul Bannick - Owls and Woodpeckers of the Okanogan Highlands and Beyond	Spend the evening at the Community Cultural Center of Tonasket with Paul Bannick and the Okanogan Highlands Alliance. See page 6 for details
February 10	" <i>Cottonwood and the River of Time: On Trees, Evolution, and Society</i> "	The Wenatchee River Institute at Barn Beach Reserve. See page 7 for details on this and other events
February 11	Winter Birding with Dan Stephens on the Waterville Plateau	Learn about winter birds of the NCW region. See page 1 for details
February 17 - 20	Great Backyard Bird Count	Count birds and have some fun doing it! See page 3 and the color insert for details.
March 2	Bats of the Okanogan Highlands	Spend the evening with the Okanogan Highlands Alliance. See page 6 for details
March 10	Find the elusive Sage Grouse lek with Dan Stephens	Meet at 6:00 am at the Easy Street Park and Ride. RSVP to Dan at 679-4706. Be prepared for the weather.



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Visit the NCW Audubon Society website for updates on these and other events
www.ncwaudubon.org