

The Pygmy Owl

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The Newsletter of the
Spokane Audubon Society



NORTHERN SAW-WHET OWL (*Aegolius acadicus*)

By: Marlene Cashen

Owls fascinate me, and I feel fortunate to be living in a state where, by my count, 15 species of owls either reside, irrupt to, or migrate through. Of course, there is no assurance that I will ever get to see all of these species, but there is always that glimmer of hope of a chance encounter somewhere, sometime. And it often happens when you least expect it. In recent years, I've had occasion to see a Northern Saw-Whet Owl in a friend's yard in Lincoln County and then again in another friend's yard in Spokane County.

The Northern Saw-whet Owl is a permanent resident in our state, and birds from Canada migrate down into Washington's lowlands east of the Cascades in autumn.

It is small (6-1/2 to 8-1/2 inches, weighing 2.6 to 3.9 ounces – about the weight of an American Robin) and short tailed with a large round head, no ear tufts, and incredibly expressive yellow eyes. Males and females are similar in appearance, but females are slightly larger. It is the smallest owl in eastern North America but not the smallest in the west.

The Northern Saw-whet Owl is solitary, secretive, strictly nocturnal, and is generally silent except during breeding season (between March and May). It inhabits all types of woodlands containing thickets of shrubs. It uses woodpecker-created nesting cavities but will take readily to a 13-to-20-foot-high nesting box. When roosting during the day in low, foliage it is well camouflaged by its plumage, is extraordinarily docile and may be approached closely. It is regularly mobbed by chickadees and nuthatches.

Hunting at dawn and dusk, it will sit and wait and drop down on prey from low perches, primarily consuming deer mice, shrews, voles, squirrels, moles, bats, small birds, frogs, and insects. In the accompanying photograph that I took in Jim Acton's yard, the owl is in possession of a rodent which, if you look carefully, can be seen as it is held by the owl's talon. When prey

is plentiful, it will cache food for later consumption. It consumes pieces of larger prey in different meals over the course of several hours. Small, dark gray pellets are ejected with great difficulty, accompanied by head and body twisting.

An interesting fact - the Northern Saw-whet Owl was first discovered by European visitors in Nova Scotia. It was so named because its alarm call, when threatened, sounded like the whetting or sharpening of a mill saw.

This species is widespread in Canada and all of the northern and western United States, but it experiences high mortality. It is preyed upon by larger owls, Cooper's Hawks, and Northern Goshawks.

I'll continue to hope for more magical encounters with Northern Saw-Whet Owls and with the other elusive owls on my wish list.



Northern Saw-whet Owl
photo by Marlene Cashen

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The Pygmy Owl
No July or August issues

SAS Summer Retreat

The Spokane Audubon Society will have our summer retreat on Sunday, July 8, starting at 9:30 am. It will be held at Haggin Farm, 15418 N. Little Spokane Dr.

Goals and priorities for the coming year will be established. A potluck lunch of salads, breads and desserts will follow. Everyone is welcome to attend. Come early to enjoy some birding.

Lindell Haggin
509-466-4118

Spokane Audubon T-shirts for Sale

If enough members indicate an interest in buying Audubon T-shirts, we can order them. Sizes range from XS through XL. They will be available in beige in either long or short sleeve styles. The design will be either the front-facing Pygmy Owl on the current shirts or the logo on the newsletter. If interested call Joyce Alonso (509-448-2447). This is a work in progress so shirts won't be available immediately.



Membership Report

by Dave Plemons

Update of Members' Nesting through May 20, 2018:

A big welcome to our new nester and lifetime member, Madonna Luers!

Many thanks to our returning nesters: Cheryl Jones-Johnson, Curtis Mahon, Delores Schwindt & Michael Chauvin & Family.

Many nesters chose to not receive a hard copy of the Pygmy Owl. If you could help us reduce costs and save paper & energy by switching to our electronic full color publication, please contact me. You already have access on the Spokane Audubon WebSite under the tab: Members Only. To receive a personal PDF copy for your own file we will need your Email address. Mine is davep_acer@msn.com. I cannot make out correctly some Email addresses. Legibility is critical.

Field Notes

Bird Sightings for the Inland Northwest, compiled by Jon Isacoff

Well, unseasonably warm and dry turned to unseasonably warm and wet in the region. The upshot is a tremendous expanse of flooded fields, bringing in all kinds of excellent migrant wading birds, sandpipers, gulls, egrets and more. And, of course, at the same time all of our beloved migrant flycatchers, vireos, and warblers are also swarming into the region. It's a glorious time to be out birding. Here are some of the great sightings from the past month. Especially rare sightings are in caps.

Snow Goose: Genessee (4/24-SW); Sprague (4/25); Canyon Road Marsh (4/26-BK); Harrison (4/26-MS); Coffeepot Lake (4/27-RT); Selle (4/28-CL); Ewan (4/28-RB); Cataldo (4/30-BK); Turnbull NWR (5/6); Spokane Valley (5/8-JI); Usk (5/12-SJ); Sprague (5/17-JI)

Ross's Goose: Selle (4/28-CL)

Red-breasted Merganser: Riley Creek (4/29-CL); Sprague (5/17-JI)

WHITE-FACED IBIS: Calispell Lake (5/5-TL); Sprague (5/5-JI)

Great Egret: Spokane Valley (4/28-TO); Sprague (5/9-JI)

Northern Goshawk: Elk River (5/5-CL)

Sandhill Crane: Peone (5/19-TO)

AMERICAN GOLDEN-PLOVER: Calispell Lake (5/17-TL)

Marbled Godwit: Sprague (5/9-JI)

RUDDY TURNSTONE: Rock Lake (5/11-RB)

WILLET: Spokane West Plains (5/5-TO); Cheney (5/8-TO)

Bonaparte's Gull: Moscow (5/9-CL)

Franklin's Gull: Spangle (5/9-JI); Spokane Valley (5/11-JI); Dworshak Reservoir (5/13-CL)

Lewis's Woodpecker: Moscow (5/8-CS)

Blue Jay: Moscow (5/4-CS)

White-throated Sparrow: Kootenai NWR (4/29-CL)

Golden-crowned Sparrow: Moscow Mountain (5/1-KD); Bear Lake (5/5-CM)

Tricolored Blackbird: Sprague (5/5-TL); Rock Lake (5/9-JI); Texas Lake (5/11-RB)

Lesser Goldfinch: Sprague (5/5-JI)

Observers: SA-Spokane Audubon; DB-Don Baker; MB-Missy Baker; RB-R.J. Baltierra; MaB-Matt Butler; CB-Carl Barrentine; DB-Donna Bragg; BB-Ben Bright; MaC-Marlene Cashen; JC-Jonathan Creel; SC-Stacy Crist; WC-Warren Current; RDC-Rich Del Carlo; KD-Kas Dumroese; TD-Tim Durnell; CE-Carol Erland; MF-Marian Frobe; MiF-Michael Fulton; LH-Lindell Haggin; JH-John Hanna; FH-Fran Haywood; DH-Dave Holick; MH-Michael Hobbs; JI-Jon Isacoff; CJ-Craig Johnson; SJ-Steve Joyce; BK-Bob Kemp; RK-Russ Koppenderayer; GL-Greg Lambeth; TL-Terry Little; CoL-Courtney Litwin; CL-Carl Lundblad; TM-Travis Mangione; CM-Curtis Mahon; NM-Nancy Miller; TO-Tim O'Brien; EP-Eric Pratt; ER-Eric Rassmussen; JR-Jan Reynolds; JR-Jethro Runco; ShS-Shane Sater; SS-Sandy Schreven; CS-Charles Swift; MS-Mark Stromberg; RT-Rex Takasugi; NT-Norma Trefry; SW-Sarah Walker; DW-Doug Ward; NW-Nancy Williams; JW-Janis Woolbright; MY-Matt Yawney; WY-Will Young



American Golden Plover
illustration © Mitch Waite

RESULTS OF THE BIG DAY/BIG SIT CONTEST--2018

by Joyce Alonso

For the second year the Spokane Audubon Board worked to entice our members to participate in a low-key, "just for fun" activity. At the suggestion of president Tom Light, a contest was set up to emphasize Earth Week (Apr. 21-28). In both the March and April issues of the newsletter, and at meetings, categories and rules were explained and people encouraged to report their results to the compiler.

The results were underwhelming, but there was at least one entry, and therefore, a winner, in each category except the child one.

Categories and winners are as follows:

BIG SIT---Mary Jokela---with 17 species, probably in her local habitat in Deer Park

BIG DAY GROUP--Madonna Luers and husband Woody---from Peone Prairie to Turnbull NWR--50+ species

BIG DAY INDIVIDUAL--Sally English--Airway-Heights to Coulee City--53 species (I was the driver on that expedition)

BIG DAY TEEN--Curtis Mahon (2nd yr winner)--SAS field trip plus solo birding that day---89 species!

Apologies to Bea Harrison, who tried to contribute, by reporting to me, but the computer goblin ate her list...I guess!

There was one other complicating factor, a personal emergency of the compiler. Jenny, we send our best wishes for you and Tom.

Next year...? Who knows? Maybe...maybe not. Feedback is encouraged.

Website Helps Prevent Communications Tower Collisions

American Bird Conservancy (Spring 2018)

Roughly 6.8 million birds die each year from collisions with thousands of broadcast and cell towers across North America. These birds, primarily night flying migrants such as warblers, thrushes, flycatchers, and cuckoos are attracted to and disoriented by steady-burning lights on towers, especially when night skies are overcast or foggy.

Building on the hard work of Joelle Gehring, staff biologist at the Federal Communications Commission, a new website, Songbird Saver, makes it easier to prevent these fatal collisions. Website users can enter their ZIP code or use a map to find towers near them, and then send a letter to the tower's operators requesting that they turn off or replace steady-burning lights with strobes, which are less hazardous to birds. The site can help pinpoint towers of special concern, such as those along critical flyways, near Important Bird Areas, or along specific migration routes. Visitors to the site can also join or start a Songbird Saver Team, which focuses attention on towers in major migratory flyways within the United States and its territories. Replacing steady lights can reduce bird mortality at towers by about 70 percent.

Hundreds of tall towers across the U.S. have already updated lighting: since May 2017, approximately 9 percent of tall towers (over 350 feet) have turned off their steady-burning lights. "We are seeing great progress and thank the operators of the thousands of towers that have already updated their lighting to help reduce mortality of birds," said Christine Sheppard, ABC's Bird Collisions Campaign Director. "But there are still tens of thousands of tall towers across the U.S. with outdated, steady-burning lights. We are asking all tower operators to make this cost- and life-saving switch to help save migratory birds. Visit the Songbird Saver website and download the app - songbirdsaver.org



Wanted: Alive Field Trip Leaders

by Alan McCoy

Those of you who have enjoyed participating in our field trips may have noticed that we are offering fewer trips this year. This is not due to fewer places to go. In fact, there are many great birding spots in Eastern Washington and North Idaho! What we don't have enough of are people willing to lead trips. This brief article is my attempt to encourage you to consider leading a trip for Spokane Audubon.

I have asked a number of people to consider leading a trip. Some have actually done so. Many though have responded by saying something like this, "Oh, but I'm not a good enough birder to lead a trip." I do understand this response. But here's a different perspective on what it takes to lead a birding field trip.

We have all been on trips where the leader is indeed a real whiz at either seeing or hearing birds or both. These experts can hear things most cannot and they have amazing auditory memory so that they also can identify the bird immediately. Or maybe they are amazing at seeing, locating and identifying birds. If the leader is also adept at helping and teaching, you have the potential to learn a great deal. It's really pretty cool that some folks have these skills and we really can learn a lot and add some birds to our lists. We do want to offer trips like this each year. But not everyone is a whiz; I know that I am not.

My birding skills are somewhere in the mid-range. I know a good number of local bird calls and I can identify many of the birds I see around these parts. But most every time I go out there are sounds I can't quite identify. Empidonax are still difficult, as are many of the smaller shorebirds, gulls, sparrow and warbler songs. In short there is much more that I don't know than what I do know about the bird world!

For me the real delight and compelling draw of birding is the hunt, being outside in search of what might be there. Some birds I know so well that ID is easy. But still it's fun to observe the behaviors, hear the sounds and often be surprised by something new about a bird I've seen hundreds of times. And

often I am wrong in my ID. It's OK to make a mistake, which is a good thing because I have made many of them. I can't seem to remember the many songs of Bewick's Wrens to save my life. Birding keeps one humble! But the point for me is to get out and have some fun and learn more about our feathered friends.

One other thing...not being with an expert gives everyone in the group the chance to discover, independently, the song or behavior of a bird. The expert is not there to point things out to you. You are on your own and you have the opportunity to make that discovery for yourself. Of course, without an expert you may not get to list as many birds for that trip; but those you do manage to identify will give great pleasure and satisfaction. And you will remember that bird even after many years. When I lead a trip, I hope it is like that for the group members. As a trip leader I try to be of assistance and share what knowledge I have; but I still have much to learn and really, over the years, I have learned immensely from the folks I am "leading."

I'll be leading another trip in the future. To those who join me, "let's have fun and learn stuff together!" For, in truth, leading for me is a collaborative experience. It can be for you too.



Bewick's Wren
photo by Alan McCoy



Maybe your child or grandchild asked "Where do eggs come from? How do they get here?" Let's review. We're not concerned with the poultry industry here, how best to manipulate and manage egg production. Instead, we focus on spring---time for nests, eggs, nestlings--small wonders of life's circle!

The entire process resembles a miniature assembly line, which involves 24-27 hours with most of that time required for shell formation. Think of the female bird's reproductive system in this order: ovary/follicles - ovum (egg) production; infundibulum - fertilization takes place here, first membrane and first albumen (white) layer form; magnum - most of albumen produced; isthmus - inner and outer shell membranes initiated; uterus (shell gland) - shell formation; vagina; cloaca/vent.

In passerines egg formation occurs mainly at night. Ova (eggs) are produced in the ovaries, but in most birds only the left ovary and oviduct persist (two are typical of many raptors). The ovary contains from 500 to several thousand finite ova. Enlarged greatly during breeding season, active ovaries resemble bunches of tiny grapes--the developing follicles. Yolk in concentric layers, extensive food reserves for the developing embryo, forms in the pre-ovulatory follicle and varies among bird species in relative amounts of yolk as well as in amounts of energy available to the developing embryo (i.e., precocial chicks, which hatch covered in downy feathers, come from larger yolks. Altricial chicks, which hatch naked, come from smaller yolks. With less food available inside the egg, the latter hatch at an earlier stage of development.)

One pre-ovulatory follicle, which contains the protein-packed yolk, ruptures per day, releasing the ovum propelled by ciliary currents and captured in the infundibulum where albumen secretions begin to coat the ovum and fertilization takes place. A bird's ovum must be penetrated by multiple sperm in order for the embryo to develop. The albumen secretions contain water, protein, minerals and sources of nutrients for the developing embryo. Some proteins also have anti-microbial properties to protect against marauding micro-organisms. The

ovum funnels into the magnum region where most of its albumen is produced.

Shell is next. The inner and outer shell membranes initiate in the isthmus and the final step in egg formation is egg shell production in the uterus. 95% of the eggshell total weight is calcium carbonate, and up to 10% of the requisite calcium is sourced from the female's bones. The shell consists of 4 layers applied to other surfaces of albumen. The egg receives its signature colors and patterning during the last few hours before it is laid. Shell thickness varies by bird species. This "new" egg is pliable when it enters the vagina and cloaca for laying and hardens with residual mucous as it dries and cools.

Interestingly, whether a bird is more likely to lay a male or female egg depends on which sex will have the greater chance of thriving. According to Rutstein et al, researchers apparently found that well-fed females are able to bias sex, more likely to produce daughters, while less well-nourished birds were more likely to have sons. This is exactly as predicted since female offspring need to be better nourished than males if they are to survive and thrive.

There appeared to be no females in 2017's typical 2 broods of western bluebirds on our property--it was a long, dry summer in the Deer Park area--a record 80 days without measurable precipitation -- not the most favorable for robust plants and insect populations...except grasshoppers.

Other egg information:

Although birds' eggs appear to be fragile, they are in fact extremely robust. The oval shape applies the same rules of engineering as an arched bridge; the convex surface can withstand considerable pressure without breaking. This is essential if the egg is not to crack under the weight of the sitting bird.

The size of the air cell is smaller in newly laid eggs, so they sink in water. Older eggs have more air space and will float. Regardless of an egg's position, the yolk rotates so that in the early stages of development the embryo always floats to the top.

Source: The Most Perfect Thing, by Tim Birkhead; Handbook of Bird Biology, 2nd edition. Cornell Lab of Ornithology

Upcoming Field Trips

For times, meeting places, etc., please go to our website: spokaneaudubon.org

June 2, 2018 Beginning Bird Watching
Sponsored by Friends of Turnbull & Spokane Audubon
<http://fotnwr.org/activities.html>

Leaders Needed

Here are some potential trip locations for June:

Iller Creek – This is a fantastic birding area. Go early (6 am) before the dogs and bikes crowd the trail.

Liberty Lake County Park – This, too, is a wonderful place for flycatchers, vireos and warblers.



Red-eyed Vireo
© Ben Hulsey

Spokane Audubon Society Membership Form

Local Membership Dues:

Individual: \$20/year _____

Couple & Family: \$25/year _____

Student: \$10/year _____

Lifetime: \$300 _____

National Membership Dues: \$35/year _____

Individual + National Dues: \$55/year _____

Couple + National Dues: \$60/year _____

Your local membership provides you with *The Pygmy Owl* and supports your local chapter's many conservation and education activities. You will also be eligible for website privileges.

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____

Zip Code: _____ Phone: _____

E-mail: _____



Please make check payable to:
Spokane Audubon Society
Send this form and your check to:

Audubon Membership
Attn: Dave Plemons
1224 W. Riverside #1101
Spokane, WA 99201

Current members may renew memberships from our web site::

<http://spokaneaudubon.org>

Receiving duplicate newsletters? Errors or other changes needed on your mailing label? Contact Dave Plemons at davep_nublado@me.com, or 413-1524.



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April 2018

To:

The Spokane Audubon Society provides resources and services to educate people about birds, wildlife, and the importance of habitats, and to advocate and support public policies and actions that conserve and restore wildlife habitats.

Visit our website: <http://spokaneaudubon.org>

Directions to the General Meeting:

*Riverview Retirement Community, Village Community Building
 2117 E. North Crescent Avenue*

To get to Riverview Retirement Community:

From West Spokane & South Hill

- I-90 East to Exit 281 toward US-2 E/US-395 N/Newport/Colville
- Follow US-2 E/US-395 N to E. Mission Ave.
- Turn Right at E. Mission Ave.
- Turn Left at E. Upriver Drive

From Spokane Valley

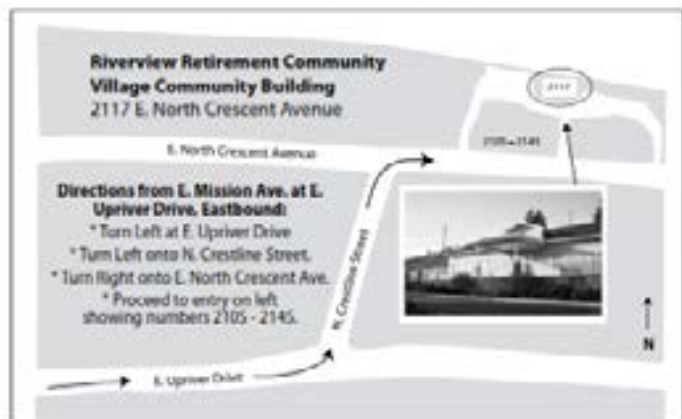
- I-90 West to Exit 282A
- Follow N. Hamilton St. to E. Mission Ave.
- Turn Right at E. Mission Ave.
- Turn Left at E. Upriver Drive

From North Spokane

- Take US-395 S to E. Mission Ave.
- Turn Left at E. Mission Ave.
- Turn Left at E. Upriver Drive

Once you're on E. Upriver Drive (see map below):

- Follow E. Upriver to Drive to N. Crestline Street
- Turn Left at N. Crestline Street
- Turn Right on E. North Crescent Drive
- Proceed to entry on left showing numbers 2105-2145



Limited parking is available by the Village Community Building. Overflow parking is along E. North Crescent Ave.

BirdNote can also be heard on
 KEWU 89.5 FM 8 a.m. daily

