

The Pygmy Owl

Volume 32
Issue 5
Jan. 2024

The Newsletter of the
Spokane Audubon Society



Jan. 10, 2024 7:00 p.m.

This meeting will only be virtually on-line via Zoom

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/81419460942?pwd=N09GL3VpeVk5aDFWNFJNbSswVHRpUT09>

Meeting ID: 814 1946 0942 Passcode: 641320

Tales from the Tri-Cities Burrowing Owl Nest Creation and Monitoring Project

presented by Jason Fidorra,
Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) has worked for years with many partners in the shrub-steppe habitat around the Tri-Cities area of southeastern Washington to install and maintain artificial nesting burrows for Burrowing Owls.

The Burrowing Owl population has declined due to conversion of nesting habitat and control of burrowing mammals that create spaces for the birds to nest. The project includes creating and installing artificial nesting burrows, nest monitoring, banding and equipping owls with GPS (Global Positioning System) backpacks, and tracking owls through their migration.

All photos from WDFW



Jason Fidorra will share some of the results and stories from this Burrowing Owl nest project. He is a WDFW Wildlife Biologist based in the Tri-Cities who has been working on the front lines of conservation of shrub-steppe, the critical habitat for many of Washington's species of greatest concern. He conducts surveys for a variety of wildlife, from elk to



monarch butterflies, and contributes to research on burrowing owls, raptors, and game birds. Jason has worked on bird research and conservation projects across North America, as well as birding and guiding in many tropical countries.



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The Pygmy Owl, the newsletter of the Spokane Audubon Society, is published monthly, September through June.

Spokane Audubon Society
P.O. Box 9820
Spokane, WA 99209-9820

Owl illustrations on pg. 1 © Jan Reynolds.



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Membership Report

by Alan McCoy

Update of Members' Status November 21, 2023 through December 18, 2023:

Welcome and thanks to our **new members**:

Individual: Barbara Jordan, Janet Glenn

Family: Sheri Denlinger, Holden Bullman

Many thanks to our **returning members**:

Individual: Jan Pochis, Mary Jokela, Cindy Bunnell, Donna Pickens, Fran Haywood

Family: Russ & Marian Frobe, Peggy & Howard Endres, Marlene & Bob Cashen, Ken & Alicia Moore, Sherry & Craig Lee, David Dempsey

Supporting: Andre & Kathie Wamsley, Brenda Klohe

Contributing: Linda Jovanovich, Sharon Lindsay, Jenny Emerson, Ruth Gifford

If you change your email address, please send your new email address to me, Alan McCoy at ahm2352@gmail.com and I will make sure you get the Pygmy Owl in your email inbox. Another way to get the Pygmy Owl is to go to our website: <https://www.audubonspokane.org/the-pygmy-owl/>.



Short-eared Owl
© Marlene Cashen

The Importance of Downed Trees

by Lindell Haggin

We've got a number of cottonwoods on our property along the Little Spokane River. I'm not sure how old they are. It seems like they have been here forever. They have been losing branches and the occasional top of a tree on a regular basis. Periodically, one of them just falls over, due to a rotting core. In April or May, one fell into a bend of the river where it is fairly shallow.

Now almost everyone knows how important it is to leave standing snags to provide potential nesting sites, food and perching opportunities. Well, those that fall down can be pretty useful as well.

The first to show up were the beavers. They stripped the bark from what used to be the upper trunk and branches. Quite often at dawn we could see them working for a few more minutes before they quit for the day. Next, they started chewing off the smaller branches and carrying them away upstream. This continued through mid-summer.



The few remaining branches provide perches for a variety of birds, but I think that the Belted Kingfisher enjoys it the most. The kingfisher can sit up there with one eye trained on the water below, looking for any movement. After a dive it may return to the downed tree or a branch on a willow overhanging the river. The Great Blue Heron perches on the trunk to dry out after wading through the water, searching for food.

Photos by Lindell Haggin

Within the last month I saw a mink scampering around in the tangle of branches under the downed tree. And last week there were three otters cavorting in the bay, diving into the elodea that grows there, looking for food. One of the otters caught a fish about eight inches long and sat on one of the larger branches lying in the water to enjoy its catch. I could see it turning the fish with its front paws while it munched down its delectable meal.

What a treat this downed tree has been for me and the local wildlife.



Opportunity now open!

We need help managing our website.

Marc Lewis has stepped down from the job. Now Jenny Emerson, Alan McCoy and Conservation Chair Shenandoah Marr are sharing the management of website maintenance, but we could use a full-time webmaster. By full time, we mean 1-2 hours per week, more or less. And by "webmaster" we mean someone who has a basic familiarity with using a computer. If you don't know when to click or double click, this job is probably not a good fit for you. But if you have basic computer skills like using Word or Excel, you could do this job. Websites now are not like the old days where you had to have HTML or Java knowledge. Website management is much more friendly, while still requiring some attention to details. We can train anyone who wants to help. If you can help or have questions, please contact Alan McCoy at ahm2352@gmail.com.

Independent bird counting opportunity next month

by Madonna Luers

The Cornell Lab

Audubon

BIRDS CANADA
OISEAUX CANADA

The Great Backyard
Bird Count



If you missed helping count birds during the annual Christmas Bird Counts, you have another opportunity next month that's even easier because you can do it on your own schedule.

The 26th annual Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) runs Friday, February 16, through Monday, February 19 (Presidents' Holiday weekend). Any time during that period you can spend a minimum of 15 minutes counting the birds you see in your own backyard or your favorite local park or natural area, and then report your results on-line.

Volunteers participating in GBBC help track changes in bird populations at a scale that scientists can't achieve alone. And even if you don't spot any rare species, counting the "regulars" is just as important.

Just last year, bird watchers from more than 100 countries reported a record 6,456 species during the GBBC — more than half of the known bird species in the world!

Launched in 1998 by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and National Audubon Society, the GBBC was the first online participatory-science project (also referred to as community science or citizen science) to collect data on wild birds and to display results in near real time. Birds Canada joined the project in 2009 to provide an expanded capacity to support participation in Canada. In 2013, the GBBC became a global project when data entry began using eBird, the world's largest biodiversity-related participatory science project.

You can find details on the GBBC at <https://www.birdcount.org/>, including an on-line bird identification guide, birding apps, and instructions on reporting your counts on-line.

If you choose to count on public land, keep in mind that the Bureau of Land Management, US Fish & Wildlife Service, Bureau of Reclamation, and US Forest Service lands are offering fee-free days over Presidents' Day Weekend.

Support for the re-WRAP Act

by Shenandoah Marr

On December 5th, two members of the Environmental Priorities Coalition and I were joined by Adam Maxwell, Senior Policy Manager with Washington Audubon at a meeting with State Senator Andy Billig's legislative aides. Together we advocated on behalf of Spokane Audubon for support from Senator Billig for upcoming legislation that would benefit birds.

Specifically, we highlighted our support for the re-WRAP Act that would create a fee for packaging manufacturers based on the recyclability/sustainability of their packaging. The funding generated from these fees would be used to improve the recycling system in Washington by standardizing what is accepted, provide uniform access in all communities, and shift the cost of recycling away from consumers to manufacturers who are responsible for excessive

and wasteful packaging. We also expressed our support for a bill (yet unnamed) that would create transparency around how oil companies set their prices. Across the state, over 50 constituents actively participated in Advocacy Days on behalf of birds and Audubon.

It was a fun experience, and we are excited to continue to advocate on behalf of birds and their habitats. The 60-day legislative session begins January 8th 2024. If you'd like to get involved, [take action today and let your legislators know you support the Audubon Washington Legislative Agenda.](#)

Field Notes

Bird Sightings for the Inland Northwest, compiled by Jon Isacoff

It's El Nino and that means a warm, dark, wet winter. We've had tons of rain and little snow. In terms of the birds, it's difficult to say if there has been any notable effect. Pine Grosbeaks continue to be seen in decent numbers throughout the region. It seems that the Bohemian Waxwing, Gray-crowned Rosy Finch, and Redpolls seen 1-2 months ago passed through the region, but didn't stick around. Overall, it's been a somewhat disappointing early winter thus far. However, with the change of seasons and the New Year, that could change. Happy holidays!

Red-breasted Merganser: Coeur D'Alene (12/3-eBird)

Anna's Hummingbird: Spokane Valley (12/13-MC)

Dunlin: Heyburn State Park (11/24-GL)

Lesser Black-backed Gull: Wolf Lodge Bay (11/26-eBird)

Pacific Loon: Mill Canyon (12/7-JI)

Black-backed Woodpecker: Elk (12/8-CM)

Blue Jay: University of Idaho (11/21-DK); Bonner's Ferry (12/3-JI); Pullman (12/11-eBird)

Pine Grosbeak: Elmira (11/23-eBird); Rice (11/29-TD); Steptoe Butte (11/30-CL); Ponderay (12/3-RDC); Albion (12/3-eBird); Bonner's Ferry (12/5-JR); Troy (12/9-GL); Plummer (12/11-GL); University of Idaho (12/12-eBird); WSU Campus (12/13-eBird); Moscow (12/16-BB); Parker Farm (12/16-GL); Spokane Valley (12/17-MC)

Gray-crowned Rosy Finch: Boundary Creek WMA (12/2-JI)

Lesser Goldfinch: Paradise Prairie (12/1-AM); Spokane (12/14-MW)

White-throated Sparrow: WSU (11/30-eBird)



Pine Grosbeak Female
© Brenden Klick



Pine Grosbeak Male
© Douglas Faulder

Observers: RB-R.J. Baltierra; BB-Ben Bright; MC-Marlene Cashen; FC-Forest Corcoran; RC-River Corcoran; RDC-Rich Del Carlo; KD-Kas Dumroese; TD-Tim Durnell; SE-Shannon Ehlers; JE-Jacob Elonen; MC-Micah Grove; LH-Lindell Haggin; CH-Cameron Heusser; JI-Jon Isacoff; SJ-Steve Joyce; BK-Bob Kemp; DK-Dave Koehler; GL-Greg Lambeth; CL-Casey Lowder; AM-Alan McCoy; CiM-Cindy McCormick; CM-Curtis Mahon; MM-Mason Maron; BM-Ben Meredyk; NM-Nancy Miller; WM-Will Merg; TO-Tim O'Brien; NP-Neil Paprocki; JR-Jethro Runco; SS-Sandy Schreven; AS-Alex Sowers; CS-Charles Swift; NT-Norma Trefry; DW-Doug Ward; MW-Michael Woodruff

Great Blue Heron

Large, common, and widespread, the Great Blue Heron is perhaps the most familiar wading bird in North America. You might find it foraging near **Green Herons** and **Red-winged Blackbirds** in a wetland, or with **Sanderlings** and **Great Egrets** on a seashore, or even fishing for koi in a backyard pond. The Great Blue Heron is an adaptable species, and its population is increasing in an era when many other bird species are in trouble.

A favorite subject of bird photographers, there's something ancient-looking about the Great Blue Heron, and there is a reason for that.



Great Blue Heron
© Evan Lipton

Living on Past Success

The Great Blue Heron probably never shared the landscape with *Tyrannosaurus rex* or any other dinosaur. The Mesozoic Era, or age of the dinosaurs, ended about 66 million years ago. While some birds lived alongside dinosaurs, no extant bird species has a lineage that old. Although its genus *Ardea* dates back 14 million years, the oldest fossils of the Great Blue Heron are from the Pleistocene Epoch, about 1.8 million years ago. So, this bird's "prehistoric" appearance — with its long, thick bill; curvaceous and powerful neck; and long legs — is more a reflection of successful adaptations that have served the species well over the past 1.8 million years.

That's not to say that the Great Blue Heron has stopped evolving. Various populations changed in

size and physical proportions through the millennia in response to differing geographic factors, and ornithologists puzzle over the species' taxonomy. There are between four and nine recognized subspecies, including the "Great White Heron," a pure-white form found in the Florida Keys and the West Indies. This population is regarded by some as a separate species. When a "blue" Great Blue Heron mates with a "Great White Heron," the result is a "Wurdemann's Heron," which has a white head, but otherwise resembles a "blue" Great Blue Heron.

Unique Appearance

The Great Blue is the largest heron in North America, standing close to five feet tall, with a wingspan of up to 6.5 feet. Its large size, blue-gray coloration, and black-striped head distinguish it from other large North American herons, including the **Great Egret** and the **Reddish Egret**.

The only other tall and overall-gray wading bird in North America is the **Sandhill Crane**, which has a dark bill, red crown, and a posture quite unlike the heron, including a "bustle" on its hind end (formed by the inner-most flight feathers, known as tertials). Cranes fly with their necks outstretched, while herons usually fly with their neck tucked into a tight "S" shape. In flight, the Great Blue's deep, slow wingbeats and curved neck posture are distinctive.

At some point during the year, the Great Blue Heron can be found near just about any body of water throughout North America. This bird breeds from southern Alaska, across central Canada to Nova Scotia, south to parts of the Caribbean and northern Mexico (rarely in northern Belize as well). The northern breeding population migrates to warmer climes for the coldest months. During the winter, the Great Blue is found across Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, reaching the northern coast of South America. A resident



population occurs in the Galápagos archipelago. Although usually solitary outside the nesting season, the Great Blue Heron sometimes migrates in small flocks, either by day or night.

Usually silent, the Great Blue Heron sounds off when disturbed and while on its nest; in fact, its breeding colonies are often quite noisy. Its most-commonly heard call is a loud, “cranky” squawk.

Not a Picky Eater

The Great Blue Heron will eat whatever it can catch with its formidable bill: fish, crustaceans, reptiles, amphibians, small mammals, and birds — especially ducklings. It usually forages alone, locating food by sight. Once a Great Blue Heron spots a meal, it strikes quickly, straightening its long, powerful neck and grabbing its quarry with its spear-like bill, then swallowing it whole. Excellent night vision allows this versatile wading bird to hunt in darkness as well as in daylight.

Colonial Nester

The Great Blue Heron nests in colonies that can include up to several hundred stick nests. These colonies, also called rookeries, usually are located high in trees, near or above water, and sometimes on islands, to discourage predation by reptiles and mammals. Sometimes pairs nest in lower shrubs and bushes, or even on the ground. Nesting Great Blues may even accept human-provided platforms, if they prove safe from predators. Pairs often return to the same colony, and reuse nests from previous years.



Great Blue Heron with chicks
© Ellie Brown

Great Blue Herons are monogamous during the breeding season, but they form new pairs each year. Courtship begins as the male selects a nest site, then

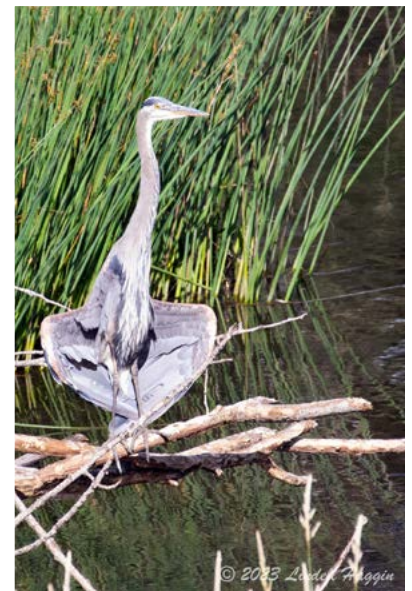
displays there to attract a female, extending his neck while spreading out his specialized neck feathers (nuptial plumes) and shaking twigs held in his bill. He also may fly in a circle around the potential nest site. Once he attracts a female, the pair will bond through continued displays: twining necks, clattering bills, and raising their nuptial plumes. The male will bring more sticks and branches to the female as she begins her nest, which is a rough platform lined with softer materials such as moss or dry grass.

Once the nest is complete, the female Great Blue Heron lays three to six pale-blue eggs, and both parents incubate in turns for about a month. The young hatch with open eyes and down-covered backs, heads, and sides. Eggs hatch over a period of several days, so nestlings are normally at varying stages of development. Older nestlings often kill their younger siblings or push them out of the nest, particularly in times of food scarcity. This seemingly cruel behavior, called siblicide, has a practical purpose: If there is enough food, more chicks survive; if not, only the strongest make it to adulthood. Siblicide is also seen in other birds such as the [Great Horned Owl](#), [Red-tailed Hawk](#), and [Brown Pelican](#).

Both parents feed their offspring by regurgitating food, and the young leave the nest two to three months after hatching. Once fledged, the young birds remain dependent upon their parents for food for another three weeks or so.

Thriving Despite Challenges

Great Blue Herons were hunted for their plumes until the early 20th century, and over the past century, they have endured habitat loss and disturbance: Wetlands have been drained, water quality has declined, and heron nesting efforts have been disrupted by development and human recreational activities. Although Great Blue Herons are adaptable, ongoing land-use change, especially along shorelines, is a continual threat.



Great Blue Heron sunning
© Lindell Haggin

Pygmy Owl Contributions

Spokane Audubon Society members who want to contribute to the Pygmy Owl newsletter can submit articles on, and photos of, birds and bird conservation issues to info@spokaneaudubon.org for publishing consideration.

The newsletter deadline is the 20th of the month for the next month's edition.



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P.O. Box 9820
Spokane, WA 99209-9820

The Spokane Audubon Society advocates for birds and their habitats in the Inland Northwest and connects people with nature.

Visit our website:

<https://audubonspokane.org>

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Annual Membership and Donation:

Student (under 21): \$10 per year _____

Individual: \$20 per year _____

Family: \$30 per year _____

Supporting: \$50 per year _____

Contributing: \$100 per year _____

Lifetime: \$500 _____

Other: _____

Annual memberships provide ongoing support for our many conservation and educational activities.

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