



Pendleton Bird Club

NEWSLETTER Volume 2, No. 8 Pendleton, Oregon August 2004

SHOREBIRD MIGRATION PICKS UP AT MCKAY RESERVOIR

Shorebirds Begin Their Long Journey southward as early as July, and now into mid-August, they are passing through our area in large numbers. Sorting them out and identifying them can present a challenge. With practice and help from our expert leader, Aaron Skirvin, it can be done. These shorebirds are so busy foraging to "stock-up" for their long flight to Central and South American wintering grounds, they are fairly unconcerned about people observing them at close range.

The Pendleton Bird Club-sponsored field trip to McKay Reservoir on August 14 proved to be a great day for the birds and the bird observers. We began our shorebirding on the muddy southeastern shore of McKay Reservoir. In all, fourteen species of shorebirds were identified: Western Sandpipers being the most common with approximately seventy-five, a dozen Least Sandpipers, at least eight Baird's, several Semipalmated Plovers, Greater Yellowlegs, Lesser Yellowlegs, Spotted Sandpipers, three Wilson's Snipes, three Long-billed Dowitchers, and the ever-present Killdeer made up the majority of birds seen. A lone Red-necked Phalarope and a lovely Solitary Sandpiper added two more to the list.

Two Semipalmated Sandpipers were divided out of the mass of birds. This sandpiper is unusual on the West Coast and common on the East Coast. The birds we see locally, especially after July, are most often juvenile birds. Very likely, most are overlooked as they mingle with the more numerous Western and Least Sandpipers and are not easy to identify.

Now, as we walked closer to the dry McKay Creek inlet to the reservoir and sank a little deeper into the mud, a new puddle came into our view. And, it turned

out to be a VERY productive puddle and brought us our bird of the day! Actually, two **STILT SANDPIPERS** gave us outstanding views of their foraging technique with their entire heads under water, their slightly downturned bills, their fresh juvenile plumage, their long yellowish-green legs, and the white in their tails during several short flights. Stilt Sandpipers are not seen every year in Umatilla County, and as far as we know, this is the first sighting in the county this year. They were County birds for all of us, State birds for most, and Lifers for several!

Other birds of the fifty-one species tallied during the outing included White Pelicans, Western Grebe, Mallards, Great-blue Herons, Double-crested Cormorants, Ring-billed and California Gulls, Caspian Terns, Osprey, Canada Geese, Mallards, Northern Shovelers, American Wigeon, Northern Pintails, Green-winged and Blue-winged Teal.

Twelve people attended this trip: Dave Herr, Bob Tapley, Hero, John and Haval Norman, Russ and Connie Betts, Diana LaSarge, June and Duane Whitten, and Aaron Skirvin.

Contributed by June Whitten

Visit the Pendleton Bird Club Web Site @
www.pendletonbirders.org

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Evening Meetings – No evening bird club meetings until October 14, 2004. Instead, we will have two scheduled field trips each month through September.

Impromptu Field Trips – In addition to scheduled field trips, we will have short early morning and late afternoon, weekday or weekend, impromptu field trips within 30 miles of Pendleton to see and hear local breeding birds – warblers, bluebirds, hummingbirds, Veery, Catbird, Grasshopper Sparrow, Fox Sparrow, hawks, waterfowl, shorebirds, etc. These trips will be announced through email a few days in advance.

Field Trip to Malheur National Wildlife Refuge

September 3 – 6th, 2004

This year our fall trip to Malheur Refuge is over the Labor Day weekend. We will leave on Friday and return on Monday. The refuge should be mostly mosquito-free and the weather, birding, and views from Steen's Mountain will be spectacular.

Contact June Whitten, 276-9019 for more information on how to participate.

18th Annual Oregon Shorebird Festival

September 3-5, 2004

at Charleston, Oregon (near Coos Bay)

For registration and other event information:

Contact Dawn Grafe (541) 867-4550

or email oregoncoast@fws.gov

Also, visit their website:

www.oregoncoast.fws.gov/shorebirdfestival.html

Field Trip Ideas? If you have a birding place you would like to share with club members, please contact June Whitten, Dave Herr, or Aaron Skirvin to schedule a club field trip there.

Pendleton Bird Club Meeting

Thursday, October 14, 2004 7:30 p.m.

First Christian Church
Pendleton, Oregon
(Across from the Pendleton Arts Center)

Karen Kronner may make a presentation.

Umatilla County Fall Migration Bird Count

Saturday, September 18, 2004

Please contact Aaron Skirvin (Umatilla County compiler) to coordinate counting areas and to get a tally sheet.

Contact Aaron Skirvin, 276-1948 or
skirvins@uci.net,

Adventures of a Novice Birder in Queensland

Jim is a semi-retired pathologist who has lived in Pendleton since 1969. An interest in birding and related matters has been dormant until recent years. Partly as a result of the influence of a wildlife biologist son-in-law he has occasionally participated in birding activities in the past 3-4 years. Recently an opportunity to work in Australia for six months presented itself and was seized upon as a challenge and opportunity for adventure. Assigned to work at Queensland Health Pathology Service, he and wife Julianne have been in Rockhampton, Queensland since July 1, 2004. "Rocky" is on the east coast of Australia 640 Km north of Brisbane on the Tropic of Capricorn. It is subtropical and during the southern hemisphere winter is a very pleasant place. Return to the US is planned for January 2005.

We Arrived In Australia July 01, 2004. After spending a day in downtown Brisbane for necessary meetings, we went to Rockhampton, Queensland, where we will be until the end of the year. "Rocky" is a city of about 70,000 on the Fitzroy river about 25 miles from the Pacific Ocean. It is the so-called cattle capital of Australia and the semi-official capital of central Queensland. You can find it on most maps. Currently the area is experiencing the worst drought in 30 years. How that affects the bird population is not evident to me at present.

Although I am working full time, most days present some opportunity to observe a new bird. That is partly because almost all the birds are new to our experience. The first was in Brisbane; a pair of Australian White Ibis grazing on a little triangle of dried up grass near the train station. Since, we have seen many — they seem to be everywhere — they are bold and don't seem to fear much of anything.

The most frequently seen bird it seems is the Magpie-Lark, known by locals as the Peewee. A little larger than an American Robin, they are black and white, have white bills and seem to be everywhere. They are aggressive and very noisy, feeding on a wide

variety of things. I saw one or two chase off a flock of gulls over a morsel.

There are many parrot-like birds. Real parrots, lorikeets, cockatoos and so forth. The Rainbow Lorikeet is most numerous—they are in our yard, along the river and in the parks. They are noisy as they feed, often in groups feeding on nuts and seeds in the trees. A solitary Sulfur-crested Cockatoo was sitting in a tree near our motel door where we lived the first week; then we saw more later.

The most often heard bird, I think, is the Torresian Crow. They look and sound much like the American Crow and seem to be everywhere. They are the first to be heard in the morning and often the last at night. Presently they seem to be solitary as I haven't seen any flocks. Of course there are a few Rock Doves (feral pigeons) in the city, but not many.

In addition to the lorikeets, crows, and peewees the neighborhood birds in our residential area include doves (Spotted Turtle-Dove?), honeyeaters (more on honeyeaters later), Crested Pigeons and of course the Ibis. Plus some little fly-bys that are as yet unidentified. The honeyeaters compete with the lorikeets for the nectar in the blooms of the bottlebrush bush.

Julianne was first to see a large colorful parrot-like bird on the line in the back yard. Later I saw it in the bush by the front door—a Pale-headed Rosella, a variant of the Eastern Rosella. Not common here but we are on the edge of its range and we got such a good look, we are sure that is what it was. Haven't seen it since, but we did see one in the zoo.

One day there was a pair of Masked Lapwings walking across the parking lot by the railroad station. Wading birds in search of water? The book says they may be seen in parks.

An interesting place to bird is the lagoon by the botanical gardens at the edge of town. It is near where we live so we have been there 2 or 3 times. Lots of action there. The water level is low so there is a good-sized mud flat for a number of shore birds, but the big attraction is the Australian Penguin. There is a flock of 100 or so, mostly resting on a point across the water. There is also a fishing group, which amounts to 15 or so birds swimming like an armada all in exactly the same direction until they suddenly turn to the center of the group and put their heads in all at the same time. This group is also escorted by one or two Darters (anhinga) and Little Black Cormorants. On the far shore there was a large flock of white birds, looking pretty much alike until viewed with binoculars. They included Ibis (here too), Great Egrets and a large number of Royal Spoonbills.

The birds scattered in the mud flats and on the shore included Purple Swamphens and Black-winged Stilts. In the water were Australian Wood Ducks, Chestnut Teals, other ducks and Eurasian Coots. Swallows in the air — I could only identify the Welcome Swallow with the deeply forked tail. Then as I was about to rise from my bench, a Blue-winged Kookaburra (kingfisher) came to sit in the tree about 10 meters away and looked at me for a while.

Further down the shore there is a large flock of Long-billed Corellas, once feeding on the ground as they do and once all perched in the gum trees. There are also ten or a dozen Sulfur-crested Cockatoos scattered in the trees along the bank. On the grass at the edge of the Botanical Garden there was a Willie Wagtail and soaring far above was a large raptor too high to identify.

The fauna here is said to be the Torresian Fauna which occupies the tropical eucalypt woodlands and savannahs of northern Australia. There are over 100 species of eucalyptus trees in Australia — the Aussies usually refer to them all as “gum trees”. The species mix of fauna and flora will vary with the distance from the ocean, the rainfall and also the elevation. Only a little way inland here it turns to open woodland and scrubland, and there will be another set of species there.

Honeyeaters are interesting—there are something like 67 species in all of Australia, all with similar size and shape but varying in color and other details. They are truly an original Australian species, not imported or migrated from other places. I have been able to identify the Blue Cheeked Honeyeater and tentatively the White Chinned. Only 62 to go! Of course there are only 6 or 7 in this area.

We have taken only one trip to the ocean so far. There I saw a White-bellied Sea-Eagle soaring above — a huge bird, quite a sight.

So far I have not hooked up with any birding groups, so the identifications have been made with the aid of the *Simpson and Day Field Guide*. It is slower and less certain than having an expert tell me the answers, but it is a challenge and perhaps more fun. But frustrating too, as I can only identify about 20% of what we see.

Later we hope to travel to other areas including the Great Barrier Reef which is nearby and at the end of the year to Perth and environs in Western Australia.

*Contributed by Jim Sawyer
Rockhampton, QLD Australia*

Over 30 People Enjoy Bird Club Picnic

At **Battle Mountain State Park** on July 24th, 32 participants had a great feed, saw a few birds, and talked about the club and its future.

The day was HOT in Pendleton and Hermiston. Not just a little hot, but very hot. So packing and traveling up to Battle Mountain was a chore. However, leaving the over-100 degree heat of Pendleton and Hermiston gave us a pleasant 80-plus-degree-evening up in the mountains.

We had some new folks, some old-timers, and two little birders under the age of three and everyone had a great time at the barbecue. Chatting and chowing were the activities of the evening. We had a good chance to visit, meet new people, and network with fellow birders. Food was ter-r-r-r-r-r-rific.

A nice viewing was the excellent sighting of a Common Nighthawk sitting high on a limb early in the evening. He (she) cooperated by staying around for all of us to see through the spotting scope until Dave Herr started playing the owl calls as evening drew near. Other species that made an aural or visible appearance included Red-tailed Hawk, Brown Creeper, American Robin, Pileated Woodpecker, Ruffed Grouse, Wild Turkey, American Kestrel, Steller's Jay, Mountain Chickadee, and Western Bluebird.

Suggestions were made to share our newsletter with the Birders Digest and receive a free subscription to the Digest in return. Also Aaron shared his "Birds of Battle Mountain State Park" data sheet listing 63 species seen within the park by him and various club members over the past year or so. A bird checklist will soon be made available to Park Visitors from this database.

Aaron Skirvin led a discussion about possible names for our newsletter and logos that we might use. Numerous suggestions were put forth for our logo-bird, including the Mountain Bluebird, Osprey, Grasshopper Sparrow, Ferruginous Hawk, Vaux's Swift, Lazuli Bunting, American Kestrel, Common Goldeneye, and Cliff Swallow. The organizers will narrow the possibilities to four or five birds and they will be presented to the club soon so that we can choose our club logo. The organizers will also select a newsletter name which may be in the Umatilla language.

Dave Herr played some of his recordings of night birds and animals. His tapes included species that might occur in the Battle Mountain area including Great Horned Owl, Northern Saw-whet Owl, Northern Pygmy Owl, and Great Gray Owl.

Contributed by Betty Klepper

Summer Updates at Mission Ponds

The Brown Grass Crunched Underfoot as the withering heat sucked the last bit of moisture from once green leaves. Grasshoppers fluttered skyward by the dozens before settling down to hide once again in the dry soil and vegetation. "Avian fodder," I thought aloud to myself.

I was working my way through the dry brush on the north side of west Mission Pond, headed for an open stretch of shoreline between the willows. Though it was mid-August and would be 103 degrees by late afternoon, the high water level at the ponds surprised me.

Normally the water level this time of year would be at least 50% lower. "Perhaps," I thought to myself, "the high water level was the reason for the lack of wading birds at the ponds this summer." Great Blue Heron, Black-crowned Night-Heron and the occasional Great Egret frequent the shallows of these ponds hunting for minnows, frogs and insects. Almost to the water's edge now, I recalled the morning of August 15th, 2003 when 27 Great Blue Herons had converged on our little desert watering hole. *What a gathering!*

Why the ponds had retained so much water this late in the season was a bit of a mystery. Perhaps some of the excavation "cracks" were starting to fill in after years of settling silt and biomass. Or perhaps the rains last May recharged the spring that feeds the east pond. We may never know for sure but the dynamics of Mission Ponds certainly influence the bird life there. Given the 110 species of birds sighted at the ponds since 2002, we can expect to see new species attracted to this changing environment.

An old friend showed up a few days ago — the Great Egret. Assuming he is one of three seen using the ponds last fall, he's a tad early this year. This year's first egret arrived on August 10th — a full 20 days ahead of last year's first sighting.

Aaron Skirvin told me he had heard reports of breeding Great Egrets in eastern Washington this year and that a few of the graceful white birds actually wintered-over through last year's brutal cold. Does that mean we may have a local breeding colony someday? Maybe, if all of the conditions are right. Thankfully, it looks like alligators aren't in the equation.....

Speaking of breeding birds, I had been looking in vain all summer for my first-of-the-year Black-crowned Night-Heron at the ponds. Finally, yesterday evening I spotted an adult foraging in the shallow water between the two ponds. Satisfied that at least one adult heron had moved back into the area, I turned to look across the river and immediately spotted a large brownish bird

resting in a dead alder tree — a juvenile Black-crowned Night-Heron! Had this bird fledged from a breeding pair at the ponds? And was there more than one bird? Sure hoped so!

Great Horned Owl Update: Yup! Our local night stalker was once again using the cottonwood thicket at the northeast corner as a hangout. This was not a big bird (a male?) but I am suspicious it may be the same bird that fledged out in the thicket last summer. He's pretty tame — twice I've walked under the branch he was sitting on only 15 feet overhead. He seemed to take more interest in my two knucklehead dogs running around than in me. You'll have to check him out.

Also using the thicket was a new visitor to the ponds this year — a light phase adult Swainson's Hawk. The first sighting of a Swainson's at the ponds this year was in mid-July but that bird was only a fly-over. Possibly this was the same bird and hopefully a frequent visitor in the future.

And, of course, no update on the ponds would be complete without an account of the daily Osprey 'blitzkrieg' on the local fish population. With several nesting pairs in the Pendleton area this year, there always seems to be an Osprey cruising about. The largest flock I've seen at the ponds this year was a flock of four — two adults and two juveniles. However, there was one encounter between an Osprey, its prey and a setting sun that shall remain fresh in my memory for years to come.

I had walked up to the ponds late one evening when the light was low on the horizon from a setting sun just after a thunderstorm had passed overhead. The fresh air was invigorating after a sweltering day of heat and humidity. Glancing out over the west pond I spotted an adult Osprey circling low over the water. Suddenly — in classic Osprey fashion — the bird came to a mid-air stop, then dove to the water's surface hitting it with a huge splash. With only a moment's pause he beat his powerful wings against the water's surface to become airborne once again. Clutched between his talons in the golden light of sunset was his prize — the brightest, most vibrant orange goldfish I had ever seen. All eight inches of him! The contrast of that bright orange fish against a background of blue-gray storm clouds hanging over the Blue Mountains was an awesome sight.

Which only inspires me to say, "*Don't wait another minute!! Grab your binoculars and come out to see what Mission Ponds has to offer this evening or tomorrow morning.*" Remember, there is always something happening at Mission Ponds.

Contributed by Jack Simons

July – August Bird Sightings

As You Read Through This Report, it will become evident that the fall shorebird migration is well underway. And as expected, many of the reports are from McKay and Cold Springs reservoirs. Review Aaron Skirvin's excellent article on shorebird identification in the last newsletter and plan on doing some 'shorebirding' this month. Craig Corder reports the water is still high at Cold Springs, so for the next couple of weeks McKay is probably the best bet. If you are interested in birding in a cooler area, consider a trip to the southern end of the County along Camas Creek and the North Fork of the John Day River. Many good birds are being reported from that area as well.

Mike Denny had an interesting sighting July 26, as he was driving on Bald Mountain, near Tollgate. Bald Mountain is a dry site and over 5000' in elevation, yet Mike found an immature **California Gull** sitting at the edge of a grassy opening. The bird appeared in good condition and eventually flew off. Checking Cold Springs Reservoir July 27, Craig and Judy Corder found a **Solitary Sandpiper** and 2 **Spotted Sandpipers**. On July 30, Craig and Judy birding at McNary Dam found **200 White Pelicans, 70 Western Grebes** and 1 **CLARK'S GREBE**. The following day they found two migrant **Warbling Vireos** at McNary Park. Birding at McKay Reservoir on July 31, Aaron Skirvin found 46 different species including 9 species of shorebirds. A **SEMIPALMATED SANDPIPER** was an especially good find. Craig and Judy Corder were surprised to find a **MEW GULL** flying below McNary Dam on August 3. The following day June and Duane Whitten found a **Semipalmated Plover** at McKay Reservoir. On August 4, Dee Croteau reported she has been seeing immature **Mountain Quail** and **Blue Grouse** along highway 395 (milepost 58), in the Camas Creek corridor. A week before this she reported seeing a **WHITE PELICAN** in the same area sitting on a rock in Camas Creek. On August 7, Aaron, June and Duane found a **Solitary Sandpiper**, a **Red-necked Phalarope** and 4 **Semipalmated Plovers** at McKay Reservoir. Later in the day they found **7 Lewis's Woodpeckers** in one group between Dale and Ukiah near the mouth of Camas Creek. On August 9, Jack Simons found a **GREAT EGRET** at Missions Ponds. The following day he flushed a **Swainson's Hawk** from the same area. On August 10, Grey Elliot reported finding a **GREAT GRAY OWL** on Kanine Ridge about 1.5 miles from the Cayuse-Thornhollow highway. Grey also reported the **BLUE JAYS** wintering at his home near Thornhollow left for higher ground with the **Steller's Jays** in late May. It will be interesting to see if the **BLUE JAYS** return to Grey's feeders later in the year. Craig and Judy reported seeing a **Lewis's Woodpecker**

along the North Fork John Day River in Umatilla County August 12, and on August 13, Aaron reported seeing a **Lewis's Woodpecker** near the same location. He also found 5 **American Crows** along Camas Creek about 1 mile downstream from Five Mile Creek. Aaron wonders if anyone else has seen **American Crows** in the Ukiah area? On August 14, Aaron led 10 members of the Pendleton Bird Club on a McKay Reservoir field trip to observe shorebirds. By far the best birds of this trip were 2 **STILT SANDPIPERS**. Check out the full report on this trip elsewhere in the newsletter. Bob and Dannell Tapley and Bill and Betty Sweetland, visiting friends from Chicago, birded at the McNary Wildlife Area August 15. The best bird they found at McNary was a **GREAT EGRET**. On August 17, Craig Corder heard a **Solitary Sandpiper** calling as it flew over his Hermiston home. Craig has still not decided if he is going to add this "heard only" bird to his yard list.

Last year, 244 different species were found in Umatilla County. As I write this, 239 species have been seen this year, with several "easy" species still to be found. So, there is no doubt we are going to break last year's record. The big question is how many more species will we find this year than we did last year? Please continue to send you bird sightings to me at **276-6413** or dsherr@oregontrail.net and don't forget to keep checking the www.pendletonbirders.org web site, where Jack Simons is keeping a running tally of the species found in the County in 2004.

Guest Editor for August: Jack Simons

*Newsletter Editor: Jane Holmes,
holmesj@eoni.com or Daytime: 541-276-3469.*



Pendleton Bird Club
Jane Holmes, Newsletter Editor
424 N.W. Bailey Ave.
Pendleton, OR 97801