



Kákya Táymut

KUK-yuh TIE-moot, Umatilla Indian Translation: *Bird News*

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ARCTIC BIRDING ADVENTURE: PART I

“North to Alaska, Part I” was the title of the presentation for the December program by Betty Klepper and Aaron Skirvin. Oregon seems far enough north for most of us with the winter weather this week! And, as it turned out, the weather in Ambler, Alaska, a small community situated just 30 or so miles north of the Arctic Circle, was very pleasant in mid-June. Photos showed the five Oregonians (besides Aaron and Betty, Fern Oliver, and June and Duane Whitten were on the trip) walking the area in sweatshirts and taking photos at 1:30 a.m.

Betty went over the geography near Ambler, including two National Parks, which were the primary reasons the group travelled to Ambler. Since there are no roads into this tundra/taiga region of NW Alaska, almost everything is flown in, and the National Parks can be visited only by flying over or kayaking into some of the areas. The first park the group flew over was Kobuk Valley National Park, known for miles of sand dunes. Betty explained that the dunes are part of a glacial deposit, and the Kobuk River meanders through this park. The Gates of the Arctic National Park is north and east of Ambler in the Brooks Range. A small, 6-passenger plane was chartered for this trip, complete with a young college girl as pilot. Sazz was a competent pilot, taking the little plane over the tundra, lakes, and taiga forest.

Aaron told of the birds seen in and around the small (~280 people) Inupiaq Eskimo village of Ambler. A Northern Hawk Owl in a tree near the cemetery was a great bird, even if part, or most, of its tail was missing. Other birds included Gray-cheeked Thrush, Bohemian Waxwing, Blackpoll Warbler, Northern Waterthrush, Common Redpoll, White-winged Crossbill, Rusty Blackbird, and Pine Grosbeak. In addition to these Arctic species,

infrequently or never seen in Umatilla County, they did see many familiar birds, including American Robin, Cliff Swallow, Bank Swallow, and White-crowned Sparrow. As in many places in Oregon, the sewer ponds was one of the better birding sites, with nesting Red-necked Phalaropes, Solitary Sandpipers, and Lesser Yellowlegs.

The people of Ambler were very friendly, outgoing, and rather curious about the strangers going around with binoculars! The Kobuk River Lodge was comfortable lodging with well-prepared meals by the owner, Shirley. Her husband, Gardner, provided some transportation since he owns one of three or four vehicles in Ambler (besides the four-wheelers which everyone has for transportation) and possibly only one of two which was in running condition.

It is not easy to get to Ambler, first you fly north-westerly from Anchorage to Kotzebue, then easterly by Bering Air to Ambler; and to return, again by Bering Air to Kotzebue, then to Nome, and Anchorage. There are several other small native settlements along the Kobuk River, but flying is still the only transportation between them.

The program at the January meeting will be Part II of North to Alaska and will tell of birding adventures at the towns of Gambell (St. Lawrence Island) and Nome.

Contributed by June Whitten

Umatilla County Christmas Bird Count Saturday, January 3, 2009

Here are the details for the 22nd official Umatilla County Christmas Bird Count, which is scheduled for SATURDAY, JANUARY 3, 2009. This



local count is part of the national 109th annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count. If you are interested in the history of the Christmas Bird Count and count data accumulated for the hundreds of counts across the country, please visit Audubon's website (<http://www.audubon.org/bird/cbc/>).

During our count last year (December 29, 2007), 18 bird counters saw 69 species of birds, and tallied a total of 8,266 individual birds in our circle. Our count circle is 15 miles in diameter, with the center located about 7 miles southeast of Pendleton. We welcome everyone (from beginning birder to expert) to help count birds on January 3, 2009. There are no major changes in Audubon's rules from last year as to how we conduct our count. The participant fee remains at \$5 per birder for those participants older than 18 years of age, and each participant will receive a CBC issue of American Birds.

Our count circle is divided into four areas, and each area has a Coordinator (see below). Each Coordinator is responsible for organizing and managing the bird counters in his/her area. To get involved, each interested participant must contact directly one of the Area Coordinators to join that group for count day. The coordinator will set a place and time for his/her team members to meet on count morning. If you want to help count birds on January 3, please contact one of the coordinators listed below.

- ◆ **Area 1** (Pendleton, Wildhorse Creek, Patawa Creek and Riverside) *Jack Simons* — home: 276-8566
- ◆ **Area 2** (Umatilla River and Cayuse) *Jenny Barnett* — home: 276-0639; cell: 310-0374
- ◆ **Area 3** (McKay Reservoir, Upper McKay Creek, and Birch Creek) *June and Duane Whitten* — home: 276-9019
- ◆ **Area 4** (Mission, Emigrant Hill and Poverty Flats) *Aaron Skirvin* — home: 276-1948; cell: 541-215-0761

Bird enthusiasts can also choose to do feeder counts if you have an active feeder in the count circle. If you want to do a feeder count, contact Aaron Skirvin (see contact information below). All Christmas Bird Count participants will get together for a count-down at the end of the day and compile the count results. Abby's Pizza on Southgate in Pendleton has reserved the banquet room for us from 4:00 – 7:00 pm that evening. Please contact Aaron Skirvin (276-1948, home or email at umatbirder@yahoo.com) if you have any questions about the areas or feeder counts or how to participate.

**LET'S GO CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNTING
ON SATURDAY, JANUARY 3, 2009!!!**

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Christmas Bird Count

January 3, 2009

**For more information, see
announcement in this newsletter**

or contact

**Aaron Skirvin umatbirder@yahoo.com
or 541-276-1948**

Bird Club Meeting & Potluck

6:30 p.m., January 8, 2009

NORTH TO ALASKA, PART 2: BIRDING AT GAMBELL AND NOME

By June Whitten & Duane Whitten

**Pendleton First Christian Church
N. Main Street, Pendleton**

Bird Club Meeting

7:00 p.m., February 12, 2009

Program TBD

**Pendleton First Christian Church
North Main St., Pendleton**



Bird Club Meeting

7:00 p.m., March 12, 2009

QUEST FOR THE ROSEATE SPOONBILL

By Bruce Mayfield

Pendleton First Christian Church
North Main St., Pendleton

VISIT THE BIRD CLUB'S WEBSITE

Bird checklists, ID Challenge, Club Member's
Photo Gallery, Newsletter Archive and more.

www.pendletonbirders.org

Bird Club Meeting & Potluck

6:30 p.m., April 9, 2009

BIRD TREKKING THROUGH PANAMA

By June & Duane Whitten and
Betty Klepper

Pendleton First Christian Church
North Main St., Pendleton

January 8, 2009, Bird Club Potluck

The Pendleton Bird Club meeting on Thursday, January 8, 2009, will begin with a potluck at 6:30 p.m. at the Pendleton First Christian Church. Please bring a dish of your choice, your own table service, and serving spoons or forks. We plan to leave the basement at the church at least as tidy as it is on our arrival without anyone having to do dishes or much clean-up. Coffee will be provided,

In addition to the delicious food, our potlucks offer a great time to socialize with fellow club members and guests. We hope you are able to join us on January 8. Anyone needing further information about the potluck may contact Lorna Waltz clwaltz@eoni.com or 276-6353.

Bird of the Month – Varied Thrush

(Ixoreus naevius)

The lovely Varied Thrush is a bird of the mountains of the Pacific Northwest as well as British Columbia and Alaska. Its preferred habitat is dense coniferous forest often where it is shady and damp. While the Varied Thrush is similar to our most common thrush, the American Robin, it is more secretive and nests are well hidden, usually against a small tree trunk with a heavy understory of brush. The bulky nest is made of mud, dried leaves, inner bark strips, and soft moss, and reinforced with twigs and lined with grass.

The Varied Thrush is migratory, which means in the fall the northern breeders move south within or sometimes beyond the breeding range. Some populations move only altitudinally. These facts allow Eastern Oregon birders the opportunity to see these thrushes in fall and winter, as well as in their breeding season.

Bird Club Meeting

7:00 p.m., May 14, 2009

Program TBD

Pendleton First Christian Church
North Main St., Pendleton



Varied Thrushes come to feeders at times, and are quite aggressive with other species when feeding. Usually a male will defend and maintain a small feeding territory around the feeder. To defend a territory, a male may first give a tail-up display, where the bird faces away from the intruder and holds its tail up to show off the gray-and-white patterned undertail coverts. If the intruder isn't intimidated, the male may turn around and give the head-forward display with the wings fanned to show off the orange wingbars.¹

The diet of the Varied Thrush, very much like the American Robin, consists of sow bugs, snails, worms and other small invertebrates. They are also fond of berries, fruit, and seeds. The young, often four in the nest, are fed exclusively on crushed insects so they may obtain enough protein for rapid growth.

The strikingly showy male Varied Thrush is virtually unmistakable. Slightly smaller than the American Robin, it is dark blue-gray above, with bright orange wingbars, throat, lateral head stripe and underparts. The black breast band and facemask set off the orange coloration. Female and juvenile birds are browner above and the orange is more subdued. The breast band and facemask are more brownish than black.

There is an extremely rare variant of this species in which all the orange in the plumage is replaced by white. And, while this species is an improbable transatlantic migrant, there is an accepted western European record in Great Britain in 1982. Interestingly, despite the scarcity of this partial albino, the British vagrant was of this type. This led to speculation that the mutation which causes the color variation may affect the navigational abilities of the thrush.²

The population of Varied Thrushes has been steadily declining over the past twenty years, probably due to loss of habitat, mainly old-growth forest. They may benefit from reserves established for the Northern Spotted Owl, if they continue to be held as reserves. In the breeding season, Varied Thrushes may be seen around Emigrant Springs State Park and the Tollgate area. In fall and winter, they may be found in the lower elevations of Umatilla County, especially where there are berries and fruit. McNary Wildlife Nature Area and Cold Springs NWR are good places to look for them.

To find this species in the spring, listen for the male's distinctive, ethereal song, which it usually sings from the top of a tall conifer. The song is a long, high-pitched whistle on one note that lasts about 1.5 seconds, and is repeated in about 10 seconds, on a different pitch.

¹http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/BirdGuide/Varied_Thrush.html

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Varied_Thrush

Contributed by June Whitten

Fall Scoters: a Tale of Misidentification

Fall is the best time of year to find scoters in Umatilla County. Nearly every fall, we see 1 – 4 Surf Scoters as they briefly stop-over on their migration from their inland breeding areas in Canada to their wintering areas along the Pacific Coast. These fall scoters are almost always hatch-year (immature) birds. White-winged Scoter has also been seen in the fall locally, but far less frequently (a total of 3 fall and 1 spring records) than the Surf. We have one record of a Black Scoter in Umatilla County: a female below McNary Dam on November 9, 2003.

This past October and November, I spent considerable time looking for a Surf Scoter in Umatilla County. They are always reported on the “big” water in Umatilla County, and I checked Langdon Lake, Indian Lake, McKay Creek NWR and the Columbia River several times. I couldn't find one until November 28, when I was returning to Pendleton from McNary Dam. I was in a hurry to get back to Pendleton, when I stopped along Highway 730 about 2 miles NE of the Highway 37 intersection (just east of Sand Station Recreation Area) to look for ducks and loons on the Columbia River. Immediately, I spotted a scoter swimming among a group of 7 or 8 Common Goldeneyes. It had all the field marks of an immature scoter: a dark brown duck, a little larger than the goldeneyes, with two white spots on each side of the head and a swollen bill. Assuming it was a Surf Scoter, because they are more often seen locally than White-winged, I looked at it briefly through my binoculars and took a couple of photos, then headed off to Pendleton.

Later that afternoon, I sent out an email to a few local birders about my sighting of the Surf Scoter in case they wanted to look for it. However, when viewing my photos of the scoter later that evening, looking at photos of immature scoters on the Internet, and



reading in some field guides, I began to doubt my identification of the Surf Scoter.

Immature White-winged Scoters look similar to immature Surfs but have diagnostic white secondary wing feathers. I didn't see any white in the wings of the Columbia River scoter, but then the duck didn't extend its wings during my brief observation. Kenn Kaufman, on page 48 in his book on *Advanced Birding*, sums up the scoter identification problem: "The face pattern of female Surf Scoters includes a dark crown, darker than the rest of the head, and two roundish white spots on the face: one before and one behind the eye. Many White-wingeds (especially immature females) share the two whitish spots on the face; and since their white wing patches are often invisible when the birds are swimming, they may be confused with Surf Scoters."

The photos I took weren't great, but they did show the bird as an immature scoter. In the fuzzy enlargements of the photos, the white spot at the base of the bill looked more roundish and the bird did not show a dark cap, both characteristics of White-winged rather than Surf, as stated by Kenn Kaufman. By now, I regretted my assumption that the bird was a Surf Scoter; I should have spent a little more time studying the bird to make certain of the ID.

The only way to properly ID this scoter would be to relocate and study it, hopefully getting a look at the color of its secondaries. From past experience, however, I've found that migrating scoters do not spend much time here, maybe at day or two, as they pass through Umatilla County.

Two days after my initial observation of the scoter, I made my way back down Highway 37 to Highway 730 and the Columbia River. Pulling off the highway at the pullout just past Sand Station Recreation Area, I immediately saw several Common Goldeneyes, with a dark brown duck in their midst. I got my binoculars on the duck, and it showed the two white spots on the head and a swollen bill. Then, in the next instance, the scoter sat up in the water and flapped its wings, its white secondaries gleaming in the sun. Over the next 20 minutes of watching the White-winged Scoter, I saw the white secondaries a few more times, usually just a thin sliver of white on the folded wing, for a total of about 8 to 10 seconds. During the entire rest of the observation, the bird did not expose its white secondaries.

Unlike most other scoters we've seen locally, this immature White-winged Scoter stayed in the same area for several days; the last reported sighting was on December 13. If you see a Surf Scoter in Umatilla County in the fall, take a little time to study its field marks to make sure it isn't a White-winged Scoter. I know I will.

Contributed by Aaron Skirvin

November – December Bird Sightings

I've had bird feeders in my yard ever since I (Dave Herr) moved to Pendleton almost 15 years ago. However, late this summer I had to take my feeders down because skunks eating the discarded seed had become a problem. In late October I refilled my feeders but with the exception of an occasional large flock of House Sparrows, have not had much using them. Two weeks ago I figured out why. An immature **Sharp-shinned Hawk** has taken up residence in the evergreen trees in my back yard. He has a fair amount of success catching **Dark-eyed Juncos**, but I wish he were doing a better job of catching **House Sparrows**. Although I don't have the numbers of birds feeding I've had in previous years, it is still fun to watch the interaction between the feeding birds and "my" **Sharp-shinned Hawk**.

Walking along the Umatilla River near his home between Pendleton and Mission on November 22, Jack Simons saw a flock of about 30 waxwings pass overhead. Based on their large size and dark brown bellies, Jack thought they were **Bohemian Waxwings**.

On November 23, Aaron Skirvin and June Whitten relocated the **BLUE JAY** they found earlier (on October 19) in Ukiah. However, Aaron noted there were few other birds in the town, stating they only found 3 **Dark-eyed Juncos**, 15 **European Starling** and 5 **House Sparrows**. Aaron and June did find more than 20 **Clark's Nutcrackers** on the upper reaches of the Yellowjacket Road, and when Aaron imitated a Pygmy Owl call, in addition to the **Nutcrackers**, he attracted **Mountain Chickadees**, **Red-breasted Nuthatches** and **Golden-crowned Kinglets**. The same day Jenny Barnett reported seeing a flock of over 40 **Common Ravens** over the Rice Park in SW Pendleton.

Barbara Clark reported the "usual cast of winter characters" has started to return to her yard near McKay Dam. She reported **American Goldfinches**, **House Finches**, **Dark-eyed Juncos**, **House**



Sparrows, a “mass” of **European Starlings**, a **Spotted Towhee**, several **Northern Flickers** a **Downy Woodpecker**, many **Black-billed Magpies** and a covey of **California Quail** using her feeders. She also noted more **American Kestrels** have been frequenting the area between her home and Pendleton this fall. On November 24, Barbara had a **Merlin** visit her yard and spend a considerable amount of time checking out the sparrows hiding in the bushes. Barbara said she had a great view of this uncommon falcon.

On November 24, I visited the McNary Dam area. The **Eurasian Wigeon** was still present, swimming on the west pond after the main parking lot. There were also 6 **Pied-billed Grebes** on this pond. A **Harris’s Sparrow** was feeding with the **White-crowned** and **Golden-crowned Sparrows** at the main parking lot. One **Red-necked Grebe** was above the dam and several **loons** were below the dam.

Aaron had an interesting observation November 24. While checking the ducks on Mission Ponds he noticed a duck acting strangely. As he watched, Aaron realized a river otter had captured the duck. Although he was unable to verify it, Aaron assumes the otter fed on the duck. Russ and Connie Betts reported **House Finches** at their feeders in SW Pendleton on November 26, the first time the finches had been in their yard for some weeks.

Bob and Dannell Tapley have settled into their new home in Tucson, AZ and are periodically reporting some their Southwest birds. They were able to observe a pair of **Harris’s Hawks** from the deck of their new home. They have some **Anna’s Hummingbirds** visiting their hummingbird feeders. We look forward to hearing more about the yard birds at the Tapley’s new home.

Russ and Connie Betts visited the McNary Dam area on November 28. They relocated the **Eurasian Wigeon** and found 2 pairs of **Hooded Mergansers** and 5 **Pied-billed Grebes**; over 100 **Common Goldeneyes** were on the Columbia River and 15 **Black-crowned Night-Herons** in the Wildlife Nature Area. At the main parking lot they found **White-crowned** and **Golden-crowned Sparrows**, **Dark-eyed Juncos**, **House Finches**, and a **Spotted Towhee**.

On November 28, Aaron reported finding a **Surf Scoter** on the Columbia River, upstream past the Sand Station Recreation Area. Not

completely satisfied with his ID, Aaron was able to relocate the scoter two days later and, with further study, determined it was actually an immature **White-winged Scoter**. Elsewhere in the newsletter Aaron describes how he finally solved this difficult identification challenge. Also on November 28, Craig Kvern reported finding three **Short-eared Owls** along Wilson Road, which is located about three miles east of Mission.

On December 5, I made my final birding trip of the year to the Tollgate area. There was no snow and few birds: several **Common Ravens**; a flock of small song birds containing **Mountain Chickadees**, **Red-breasted Nuthatches**, **Golden-crowned Kinglets**, and a **Brown Creeper**; and 3 **Gray Jays** at Target Meadows.

Aaron and June and Duane Whitten conduct a raptor survey (Pendleton, Cayuse, Pilot Rock areas) every month from November through March. After one survey, Aaron reports hawk numbers are relatively high locally. **Red-tailed** and **Rough-legged** numbers are noticeably higher while **Northern Harrier** numbers appear about normal.

On December 6, a **Black-capped Chickadee** visited Connie Betts’ feeder in SW Pendleton. Birding at McNary Wildlife Nature Area on December 6, Neal Hinds found a **Harris’s Sparrow**. Also on December 6, Aaron found 2 **Prairie Falcons** along Highway 37 near Holdman. At Hat Rock State Park, he was surprised to see a female **Common Merganser** begging for food along with the domestic ducks and geese and **American Wigeons**. He also noted the **Greater White-fronted Goose** is still there as is one small **Canada Goose**. Along the Columbia River he found **Glaucous-winged**, **Mew**, **California**, and **Ring-billed Gulls**.

Craig Kvern found more **Short-eared Owls** in CRP lands on the Umatilla Indian Reservation: on December 6, eight on the north side of the Umatilla River between Cayuse and Thornhollow; and on December 7, three just west of Moonshine Creek.

Rose Scott birded the Echo, Stanfield, and McNary areas on December 7. Her best find was a late **OSPREY** along Stanfield Meadows Road. The previous latest fall Osprey was reported by Jack Simons on December 1, 2007, along the Umatilla River between Pendleton and Mission. Rose also reported finding one **Prairie Falcon** along Emert Road and at least eight species of ducks, several



Black-crowned Night-Herons, a **Belted Kingfisher**, a **Spotted Towhee**, and a **Golden-crowned Sparrow** at McNary Wildlife Nature Area.

The following day Aaron and June birded both south and north of Pendleton. At Pilot Rock they found 6 **Eurasian Collared-Doves**. Taking the back roads north from Highway 74 west of Pilot Rock, they found very few birds. However, birding picked up when they reached the Columbia River. The **White-winged Scoter** was still present. At the Port of Umatilla there was a pair of **Barrow's Goldeneyes** among several dozen **Common Goldeneyes**. There were two **Peregrine Falcons** at McNary Dam and an adult **Harris's Sparrow** at the main parking lot of the Wildlife Nature Area.

McNary Wildlife Nature Area was a popular birding site on December 13. Neal Hinds and Tri-Cities birders, Dennis Rockwell, Kevin Burke, and Rod Coler, reported finding 2 **Harris's Sparrows** (one immature and one adult) at the main parking lot. The Tri-Cities group, Steve Mlodinow (Seattle birder), and Dave Irons (Eugene birder) reported 3 **BARN SWALLOWS** at the Wildlife Nature Area. This is the latest fall/winter report of Barn Swallow for Umatilla County, the previous late date was November 9, 2008, when 2 were reported near Cold Springs NWR.

Steve Mlodinow and Dave Irons also reported hearing a **SWAMP SPARROW** at the Wildlife Nature Area. This is the first report (of which we are aware) of a Swamp Sparrow, which may be a very rare, annual winter visitor at McNary Wildlife Nature Area, since 2004. Mlodinow and Irons also saw the **White-winged Scoter** near Sand Station Recreation Area on December 13.

On December 14, while on a walk with Ellen Hartstirn on "a beautiful lightly snowy afternoon," Kate Ely observed an adult **Bald Eagle** along the Umatilla River near the Pendleton Center for the Arts. Also, on December 14, Aaron found 1 **Great Egret** fishing in Stage Gulch Creek in Stanfield and a male **Eurasian Wigeon** at Hat Rock State Park. Just before dark on December 15, Neal Hinds stopped to check out the birds at McNary Wildlife Nature Area. At the main parking area, Neal found 3 (2 adult and 1

immature) **Harris's Sparrows**, 1 **Red-winged Blackbird**, 1 **Spotted Towhee**, and "a good mix of **Song**, **White-crowned**, and **Golden-crowned Sparrows**."

On December 20, Aaron reported seeing 1 **Peregrine Falcon** and 1 immature **Harris's Sparrow** at McNary Wildlife Nature Area. Also birding at McNary Wildlife Nature Area on December 20, Neal Hinds found 46 species of birds including a male **Eurasian Wigeon**, which hadn't been seen there since November 30.

Winter has descended in all earnest on Umatilla County during the past 10 days, with below-zero temperatures and snow blanketing the entire county. Remember Dave Herr's report of no snow at Tollgate on December 5? On December 21, the Oregon Department of Transportation reported 55 inches of roadside snow at Tollgate! Even the low country in the NW part of the county has a foot of snow. With cold temperatures and more snow predicted for the next several days, possibly through the New Year, driving conditions are poor, making birding difficult, except at feeders.

If you feed birds, you are probably noticing an increase in numbers visiting your feeders. Keep the feeders full of bird seed for our feathered friends, and report your bird sightings to me (Aaron Skirvin: 276-1948 umatbirder@yahoo.com) through January 20. Dave Herr will return to his duties as Bird Sightings editor when he gets back from his South American birding trip in mid-January.

Another year has come and gone already; they do go by too fast! We will start the 2009 Umatilla County Bird List on January 1; so send me your bird sightings for the newsletter and the annual bird list.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year. Have a safe Holiday season.

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Original art work by John Green
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