

The Pygmy Owl



Volume 30
Issue 4
Dec. 2021

The Newsletter of the
Spokane Audubon Society

December 8, 2021, 7:00 p.m.

This meeting is only via Zoom on-line since pandemic conditions and prevention restrictions continue to keep us from meeting in person. To join the Zoom meeting

(Meeting ID: 889 7629 8310, Passcode: 018630), link to

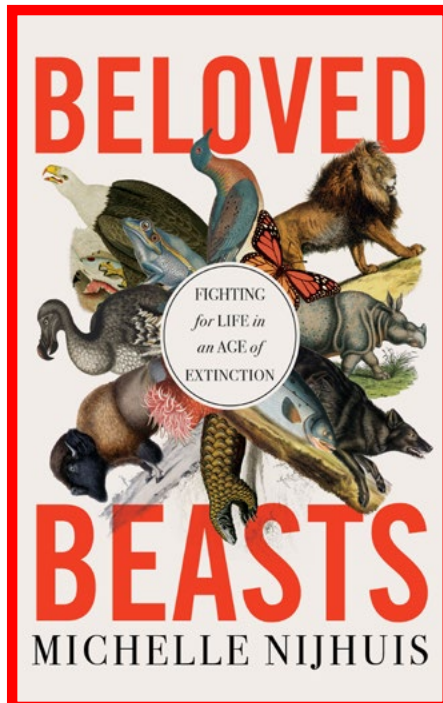
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88976298310?pwd=MIBCeWRmb2NJJaVY4bTgyNUtmZm0yZz09>

Finding Hope in Conservation History

presented by **Michelle Nijhuis**

In the late nineteenth century, humans came at long last to a devastating realization: their rapidly industrializing and globalizing societies were driving scores of animal species to extinction. Over the decades since, the modern conservation movement has evolved from early campaigns to save charismatic species like the American bison into an effort to defend life on a larger scale.

Journalist Michelle Nijhuis, the author of the book *Beloved Beasts: Fighting for Life in an Age of Extinction*, will share some of her research on the accomplishments, oversights, and outsized personalities of the movement, and discuss how this colorful history can guide and inspire today's activists.



Michelle Nijhuis is the author of a new history of the modern conservation movement called: *Beloved Beasts: Fighting for Life in an Age of Extinction*. A project editor at The Atlantic, she is also a longtime contributing editor at High Country News and an award-winning reporter whose work has been published in National Geographic and the New York Times Magazine. After 15 years off the electrical grid in rural Colorado, she and her family now live in the Columbia Gorge.



Two signed copies of *Beloved Beasts* will be given away in a random "drawing" of participants in the December 8 on-line Zoom meeting. Signed copies are available locally at Wishing Tree Books for holiday gifting to yourself or others.

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Spokane Audubon Society
P.O. Box 9820
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Christmas Bird Count

Need a break from cultural craziness? Here's something that might help! Join us on this year's Christmas Bird Count. It's a chance to enjoy some of nature's finest creatures with others who share your interest. You don't have to be an expert to participate. Although it is a dawn to dusk affair, you don't even have to stay the whole day – part-timers are welcome, too.

Cheney's Christmas Bird Count is on Saturday, December 18, 2021. Contact Sandy Schreven at 509-999-9061 or email sschreven@hotmail.com to join the Cheney count.

Spokane's Christmas Bird Count will take place on Sunday, January 2, 2022. Please contact Alan McCoy at 509-999-9512 or email ahm2352@gmail.com to join the Spokane count.

Membership Report

by Alan McCoy

Update of Members' Status October 20, 2021 through November 20, 2021:

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

Individual: Carla Brannan, Steven Camerer, Shawn Brown, Ardyth Bass, Sherry Ennis, Sally Broadbent, Harry Black

Family: Jan Pochis

Supporting: Travis Scott, K. Edquist, Donald Driscoll

Many thanks to our **returning members**:

Individual: Ellen Bower, Tina Penny, Steven Siegfried, Vicki Egesdal, Linda VanHoozer

Family: Marian & Russ Frobe, Jane Beaven & Dan Finn

Supporting: Bud & Roxanne McCormack, Linda Jovanovich

Contributing: Sharon Lindsay, Therese Nielsen, Jenny Michaels

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>

Project FeederWatch is easy community science

By Madonna Luers

If you're more inclined to watch winter birds outside your window from the cozy comfort of your armchair, Project FeederWatch is your kind of community science!

Project FeederWatch is the survey program of the Cornell University Lab of Ornithology and Birds Canada that's been running continent-wide since the winter of 1987-88 to document the distribution and abundance of winter bird populations from mid-November through April. It's open to participation by anyone willing to periodically identify and count birds anywhere – despite the name you don't even need a feeder, just habitat that attracts birds – and it's grown from 4,000 annual participants to well over 20,000 in almost every Canadian province and all states but Hawaii.

I've participated in Project FeederWatch for 28 seasons now, since the winter of 1992-93 at two different residences, making about 10 counts per season (about twice a month) and identifying a total of 46 species among thousands of individual birds. When I started it was all paper and pencil recording and postal mailing tally sheets – a format still acceptable if that's your preference – but now I enter my data right on my cell phone and I can see in "real time" where other participants are seeing birds. It's been fun to track when certain birds show up at winter feeders in my yard, but I also love that I'm contributing to a valuable database over time.

Even though this season's Project FeederWatch officially already began with the earliest acceptable count date on November 13, you can still join now to count through April. Your registered count site can be your home or someplace you like to go regularly – it just has to be the same site for every count. The schedule is up to you. You can count as long as you like on two consecutive days of your choosing, just not less than five days apart per count through the survey season. You count birds attracted to food, water or habitat plantings maintained, plus predatory birds attracted to those birds. For every species you can identify, you record the maximum number of individuals visible simultaneously during your two-day count.

All the details on getting involved are at <https://feederwatch.org/>.



Although since 2016 Project FeederWatch gets some funding from Wild Birds Unlimited, it's mostly supported by us participants with our annual \$18 fee. This covers materials (like bird identification help and count calendars), staff support, data analysis, and a year-end report. Like a gym membership fee that reminds me to schedule exercise, it's the best \$18 I spend once a year to commit myself to spend time just sitting for a few hours and watching bird interactions.

We all like to watch birds, but I'm not sure I would have spent the time I give to Project FeederWatch right at home to witness some really cool things, like partying Pine Siskins surrounding an annoyed Hairy Woodpecker on a suet cake, or a stealthy Northern Pygmy Owl taking out a hopelessly unaware House Finch pigging out at a seed feeder, or a lineup of convivial Cedar Waxwings passing Oregon Grape berries to each other, or a covey of California Quail freezing still in their ground feeding when a hungry Cooper's Hawk flies overhead. It's a great way to spend a winter day!

Embrace the winter by counting birds for science!



Black-capped Chickdees
by Alan McCoy

Local holiday gift idea from Audubon

Looking for a locally-sourced, inexpensive, easy-to-mail holiday gift?

The Spokane Audubon Society's 2022 Calendar of Birds of Eastern Washington and Northern Idaho fits the bill, and is a gift that will inform and entertain throughout the new year.

As usual, the calendar features beautiful local bird photography by chapter members and information about featured species. But this year for the first time the calendar also includes notes by date on what birds to watch for when. The notes on phenology -- seasonal natural events and their cycles, including bird migration and nesting -- are based on several local "citizen science" sources to provide markers of the ever-changing seasons of bird watching.

The calendar is \$14, including shipping directly to a gift recipient, available on-line at <https://www.audubonspokane.org/calendars-available>.

It can also be purchased by sending a \$14 check payable to Spokane Audubon Society, with return mailing address, to Spokane Audubon Society, P.O. Box 9820, Spokane, WA 99209-9820. It's also available at Auntie's Bookstore in downtown Spokane and at The Well-Read Moose bookstore in Coeur d'Alene, ID.

Proceeds from calendar sales help fund Spokane Audubon's work to protect bird habitat and help secure public access to birding areas.



2022 Spokane Audubon Society Calendar
Birds of Eastern Washington and Northern Idaho

Skagit Delta Field Trip



Skagit Delta
© Sharon Lindsay

The last week of October, five brave souls (Bea & Jim Harrison, Alan McCoy, Sharon Lindsay, and Marc Lewis) embarked on a mission: to experience the phenomenon that is the Skagit delta during the Fall bird migration. Burdened with copious quantities of bird books, apps, scopes, cameras, binoculars and most importantly rain gear, we rose to the occasion.

Our first stop of the morning would have made the whole trip worthwhile. We arrived at daylight at Fir Island management area, (also known as Hayton Farms). The tide was very low, exposing acres of mud flats. Perfect conditions. The next hour was wonderful. Thousands of Snow Geese were roosting in the nearby bay. As the morning progressed, flight after flight came over us as they headed for inland ag fields. Bald Eagles swooped through the geese, keeping them on the move, each flight starting with a cacophonous roar of geese calling, distracting us from the hundreds of Dunlin and other shorebirds circling overhead and arriving to feed on the wetlands before the tide returned. We recorded 23 species before moving on.



Bald Eagles harassing Snow Geese
© Bea Harrison

Next, we visited Wiley Slough at the Skagit Wildlife Area, just a few miles away. This site has wetlands, a good riparian habitat and a nice walking trail along a levy. We saw a variety of birds from Purple Finches, a Pileated Woodpecker, a Peregrine Falcon to Wilson's Snipe.

We moved on to Lone Tree Point on Skagit Bay. We were looking for the Black Oystercatchers that hang out there, but the tide had come in and covered their normal shell flat. Luckily, 18 of them flew by as we were leaving. A raft of hundreds of Double-crested Cormorants was seen just offshore. We also picked up Eurasian Wigeon there.

Next stop was Deception Pass State Park Cranberry Lake site. We parked and broke out the scopes. This is a good spot to get pelagics. We saw a variety of gulls including Heermann's and Short-billed. Some highlights were Harlequin Ducks, Surf Scoters and Pigeon Guillemots in their winter plumage. We missed seeing the Marbled Murrelets, which are often seen there.

We moved on to Ship Harbor Preserve, close to the Anacortes ferry. This park is a well-kept secret. Purple Martins nest there in the summer. American Wigeons always seem to be feeding at a fresh-water runoff area, providing amazing views and photography opportunities. We got a great look at three Anna's Hummingbirds, Golden-crowned Sparrows eating apples in a tree and a variety of riparian and



Golden-crowned Sparrow
© Alan McCoy

waterbirds. We watched a Bald Eagle attack a family of river otters. For that matter, during the trip, we saw eagles attacking loons, ducks, and geese, and we saw one eagle catch and eat what looked like a

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coot. No shortage of Bald Eagles in that area. Speaking of eating, it was great to go out to dinner in a real restaurant again! Which we did each night.

The second day of our trip, we started at Fir and Wiley slough again. It was a beautiful morning, considering we had a 100% chance of rain predicted. The morning light over the slough was awe-inspiring, and everyone got some beautiful shots. Once again, Snow Geese were abundant and we picked up a few peeps.

At Wiley Slough, only Bea got to see the resident Black Phoebe, fleetingly, but everyone got to see some Savanna Sparrows, Northern Shovelers, and some Green-winged Teal.



Chestnut-backed Chickadee
© Bea Harrison



Savannah Sparrow
© Alan McCoy

From there we drove around March Point south of Anacortes where we found White-winged Scoters. Next, we checked the bay behind the Swinomish casino. The rain prediction proved true, as we drove to the beach at Padilla Bay State Park. We decided to persevere and drove to the overlook on Samish Island. This was another opportunity to break out the scopes as we tried to keep the optics dry enough to scan the bay. Alan found a Pacific Loon and Bonaparte's Gull. Our last location for the day was the driving loop around Washington Park in Anacortes. We stopped to glass the straight and we were attacked by Chestnut-backed Chickadees and sparrows. One chickadee landed on Jim's hand!

Obviously, someone had been feeding the birds at this spot. It was a good opportunity to get some close-up photos of Chestnut-backs. We also got good looks at more Harlequin Ducks and a Brown Creeper caught our eye near the car.



Skagit Valley Geese in Flight
by Marc Lewis

Wearily, we headed back to town. Final total 79 species, but the best reward of the trip was the opportunity to witness one of mother nature's special migration events in one of the most beautiful areas of the state.

We crammed a lot of nature viewing into two days. It was especially fun with great folks like Sharon, Alan and Marc.

We missed the swans this year, but there's always next October.....

The beauty of Fall has come and gone

By Carlene Hardt

Watching the colors change and seeing some of the birds before they leave Turnbull NWR was a delight.



The Woolly Bear Caterpillar is a tiny thing and I almost stepped on it! They have a reputation for being able to forecast the coming winter weather. If their rusty band is wide, then it will be a mild winter. The more black there is, the more severe the winter. Well this one doesn't have a wide rusty band. So, according to this little caterpillar, it looks like we might get a hard winter!

The bird peering at me through the leaves is a Dark-eyed Junco. It is a common bird that I have not noticed nor taken a picture of before. It eats mostly seeds and insects. Dark-eyed juncos are nicknamed snowbirds, as they seem to bring snowy winter weather on their wings. They can live to be 11 years old. When it's cold outside, juncos grow down jackets. Their coat of feathers is 30% heavier in winter than in summer. If you want to attract them to your ground feeders, offer them millet.



(cont on page 8)

The large flocks of Red-winged blackbirds were fun to watch as they flew and fill the top of trees. When they called to other blackbirds, it was quite the chorus! I noticed that sometimes they would stop singing suddenly for no apparent reason that I could tell. (There are about 240 birds in this picture!)



Look closely on the “tree of red-wing blackbirds”, notice that one bird is not like the others!



There is a year-round lake on Turnbull property just before the entrance to the refuge. Several times I passed it and I thought I saw something white in the middle of it each time. I stopped one day to see what it was and there was both a Great Egret and a Great Blue Heron hanging close to one another! The water level was down enough for these two to find their daily meals.

All photographs by Carlene Hardt

Save the dates!

Klamath Basin Audubon's

Winter Wings Festival

February 18-20, 2022

3 days of field trips, workshops, & presentations in Klamath Falls, Oregon, for birders & photographers

www.WinterWingsFest.org

Registration opens in Dec. 2021 



Register soon for Winter Wings Festival

Dates: Friday, February 18, 2022 through Sunday, February 20, 2022

Host site: Oregon Institute of Technology (Oregon Tech), 3201 Campus Drive, Klamath Falls, Oregon, 97601

[Website: www.WinterWingsFest.org](http://www.WinterWingsFest.org)

Registration opens in mid-Dec. on date TBA
 For information call 877-541-BIRD (2473) or email to info@winterwingsfest.org

Get ready for a 2022 Winter Wings Festival like no other! Winter Wings brings together birders and photographers to learn and explore with top notch professionals and enthusiastic local guides. The Klamath Basin is renowned for its massive wintering population of Bald Eagles, but is prime habitat for many other raptors including owls, as well as a diversity of waterfowl. The 2022 Festival will feature Richard Crossley, author of the Crossley ID Guides and co-author of *Ornithery: For Your Mind, Body, and Soul*. For our photography keynote we are excited to have Jennifer Leigh Warner, conservation wildlife photographer. Join us for an extensive array of field trips, workshops, presentations, and receptions that highlight the wonders of the Klamath Basin in winter.

On Friday, Feb. 18th we will have several presentations on the status of Klamath Basin wetlands and partner initiatives.



Winter Wings Festival - Klamath Falls, OR
 ©Forbes Newsletter

Field Notes

Bird Sightings for the Inland Northwest, compiled by Jon Isacoff

Winter is just about here. It looks like it will be a good or perhaps very good winter finch season with multiple reports of White-winged Crossbills, Pine Grosbeaks, and Common Redpolls around the region. A few Blue Jays continue to be a regular fall/winter visitor for the 3rd consecutive year, perhaps indicating a trend. Anna's Hummingbirds continue to expand their range East and North from the Tri-Cities and L/C Valley. Happy early winter birding!

Greater White-fronted Goose: Wandermere Lake (11/6-AT)

BLACK SCOTER: Mill Canyon (10/19-TL)

Surf Scoter: Rock Lake (10/20-CH); Colville (10/29-TL); Sprague (11/5-TL)

White-winged Scoter: Sprague (11/5-TL); Central Premix (11/7-MS); Spring Valley Reservoir (JH)

Red-breasted Merganser: Sprague (11/5-TL); McArthur Lake WMA (JR and SE)

Anna's Hummingbird: Pullman (10/26-RB); Pine Bluff (10/31-AT); Elmira (11/3-DR); Spokane Valley (11/6-MC and NT); Elmira (11/3-DR); Moscow (11/16)

Pacific Loon: Spring Valley Reservoir (10/31-CS)

Blue Jay: Northport (10/23-eBird); Bonner's Ferry (11/1-JR and SE); Pullman (11/3-MM)

Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch: Ritzville (11/12-eBird)

Pine Grosbeak: Queen Mountain (10/23-JR and SE); Mill Canyon (11/11-TL)

White-winged Crossbill: West Spokane (11/1-MW); Mt. Spokane SP (11/2-eBird); Moscow (11/8-BM); Little Pend Oreille NWR (11/11-eBird)

Lesser Goldfinch: Feryn Conservation Area (10/31-NE); Plummer (11/9-CH)

Golden-crowned Sparrow: Julietta (10/23-NP); WSU (11/1-MM); Colfax (11/5-TL)

White-throated Sparrow: Willow Lake (10/25-NE); University of Idaho (10/30-BM); Rosalia (11/9-eBird)

Swamp Sparrow: Bonner's Ferry (11/6-JR and JE)



Black Scoter - Male
© Doug Hitchcox



Black Scoter - Female
© Jay McGowan

Observers: RB-R.J. Baltierra; DB-Donna Bragg; BB-Ben Bright; TB-Taylor Baldwin; Marlene Cashen; FC-Forest Cordoran; RC-River Corcoran; WC-Warren Current; RDC-Rich Del Carlo; KD-Kas Dumroese; TD-Tim Durnell; SE-Shannon Ehlers; Jacob Elonen; NE-Norm Engeland; FF-Fred Forssell; BF-Bob Flores; DG-Don Goodwin; CG-Cierra Gove; LH-Lindell Haggin; JH-John Hanna; CH-Cameron Heusser; I-Jon Isacoff; LJ-Louie Johnson; SJ-Steve Joyce; BK-Bob Kemp; DK-David Kreft; GL-Greg Lambeth; TL-Terry Little; CL-Carl Lundblad; AM-Alan McCoy; CM-Curtis Mahon; MM-Mason Maron; AM-Alan McCoy; BM-Ben Meredyk; NM-Nancy Miller; WM-Will Merg; RuM-Russ Morgan; TO-Tim O'Brien; NP-Neil Paprocki; DR-Diana Roberts; JR-Jethro Runco; SS-Sandy Schreven; MS-Mark Selle; CS-Charles Swift; NT-Norma Trefry; AT-Andrew Thomas; DW-Doug Ward; SW-Steven Warren; KW-Kevin Waggoner; MW-Michael Woodruff

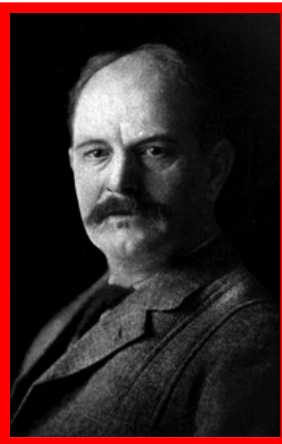
All about the Christmas Bird Count

From National Audubon Society

More than 50,000 observers participate each year in this all-day census of early-winter bird populations. The results of their efforts are compiled into the longest running database in ornithology, representing over a century of unbroken data on trends of early-winter bird populations across the Americas. Simply put, the Christmas Bird Count, or “CBC”, is community science in action.

History

Frank Chapman



Prior to the turn of the century, people engaged in a holiday tradition known as the Christmas “Side Hunt”: They would choose sides and go afield with their guns; whoever brought in the biggest pile of feathered (and furred) quarry won. Conservation was in its beginning stages around the turn of the 20th century, and many observers

and scientists were becoming concerned about declining bird populations. Beginning on Christmas Day 1900, ornithologist Frank Chapman, an early officer in the then budding Audubon Society, proposed a new holiday tradition—a “Christmas Bird Census”—that would count birds in the holidays rather than hunt them. So began the Christmas Bird Count. Thanks to the inspiration of Frank M. Chapman and the enthusiasm of twenty-seven dedicated birders, twenty-five Christmas Bird Counts were held that day. The locations ranged from Toronto, Ontario to Pacific Grove, California, with most counts in or near the population centers of northeastern North America. Those original 27 Christmas Bird Counters tallied a total of 90 species on all the counts combined.

What do the Count data tell us?

The primary objective of the Christmas Bird Count is to monitor the status and distribution of bird populations across the Western Hemisphere.

The count period, which is from December 14th to January 5th in North America, is referred to as “early winter,” because many birds at this time are still in the late stages of their southward migration, so it is not “true” winter. When we combine these data with other surveys such as the Breeding Bird Survey, we begin to see a clearer picture of how the continent’s bird populations have changed in time and space over the past hundred years.

The information is also vital for conservation. For example, local trends in bird populations can indicate habitat fragmentation or signal an immediate environmental threat, such as groundwater contamination or poisoning from improper use of pesticides.

From feeder-watchers and field observers to count compilers and regional editors, everyone who takes part in the Christmas Bird Count does it for love of birds and the excitement of friendly competition -- and with the knowledge that their efforts are making a difference for science and bird conservation.

As long as there are birds to be counted, the Christmas Bird Count will go on being the most popular, fun, and rewarding bird census the world over!



Christmas Bird Count
© Discover Magazine

Re-Wilding Spokane Schools

by Allison Bennett and David Reese

Like many, Allison Bennett began advocating for our environment and wildlife through a personal connection to a specific area of land and the wildlife that live there.



Five years ago, she bought her first home, on 63rd Ave in Spokane. It shares a property line with a greenspace landfill buffer zone, that was about 15 acres of mature Ponderosa Pines, used as an unofficial dog park. She walked that forested area every day, often more than once, for 5 years, connecting with the land and the wildlife; primarily birds.

Using the Merlin app, she began to identify the birds that would spill into her yard from the greenspace: American Robins, Eurasian Collared-Dove, Cooper's Hawks, Black-chinned Hummingbirds, Rufous Hummingbirds, Northern Flickers, American Crows, Red-breasted Nuthatches, Pygmy Nuthatches, Mountain Chickadees, California Quail, American Goldfinches and Pine Siskins. There are also bats, squirrels, voles, and field mice. Or rather, these species were there, until last month.

After a land swap, Spokane Public Schools now owns that land, and is building the new Carla Peperzak Middle School, one of three new middle schools funded by a 2018 bond measure. As the plans for the school became clearer in Spring 2021, Allison started reaching out to the Spokane Public Schools to advocate for habitat and wildlife preservation to be integrated into the plans for the school. At this time, they are planning to utilize mostly native species for landscaping for this particular site, and are retaining



a very small percentage of trees on the western edge of the lot.

Watching over 95% of those trees being taken down over the course of a week was devastating to Allison, as was the impact on the birds. The birds have been agitated, as their usual habitat has been compressed, and they have begun to move into the surrounding area to find new homes.

Allison learned that the National Wildlife Federation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have programs called "Schoolyard Habits" that provide the framework for habitat preservation and restoration for schools, and there are thousands of schools across the US that participate in these programs. Allison learned that David Reese, a science educator for Spokane Public Schools at Pratt Academy, is working on a proposal to eliminate non-sterile landscapes and re-wild much of the landscaping within Spokane Public Schools properties. He has already begun with a pilot project at Pratt, and there are several ways in which interested Spokane Audubon Society members could participate.



David Reese

The impact of SPS adopting the "re-wilding" approach would be profound. SPS is the second largest school district in Washington State, serving almost 30,000 students in kindergarten through Grade 12. District facilities currently

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include 34 elementary schools, 6 middle schools, 5 high schools, 6 educational alternative learning buildings, and 1 administrative building. In addition, there are 3 new middle schools currently under construction, including the Peperzak. If all of the properties began to shift to this new more environmentally sound practice, it would increase bird habitat significantly.

The current project at Pratt Academy involves students working to develop solutions for the problem of overconsumption of resources within Spokane Public Schools properties. They have analyzed data provided by community partners and have concluded that, by redesigning outdoor spaces surrounding schools within the district, we can accomplish multiple environmental sustainability objectives.

One of the primary aims is to reduce water usage while restoring native habitat by removing ornamental turf and replacing it with carefully designed “green spaces”. Mr. Reese’s Re-Wilding Spokane Public Schools project’s environmental sustainability-based objective is to reduce freshwater consumption throughout the many properties managed by Spokane Public Schools as well as restore habitat for many native species.

As our students engage with experts from the community who are equally invested in this problem, we will accomplish an additional objective - the creation of authentic and relevant learning opportunities. As students work within their classrooms developing their ideas and solutions through the implementation of STEM-based disciplinary core ideas, they will plan these carefully designed “green spaces” using their knowledge of regional freshwater resources, native species, energy flow, bio geochemical cycles and more.

Following the design stage, students will participate in the physical work required to transform this sterile landscape into the space they have thoughtfully designed. Some of these tasks might include (but will not be limited to) planting of native species, modification of current irrigation system, and installation of ground cover/mulch. Once the landscape is transformed, students will have the opportunity to use this space to learn, ponder, and actively engage in the process of inquiry by collecting data and reporting on phenomenon related to the return of species and reduction in freshwater consumption.

In addition to the benefits the community will receive through the conservation of freshwater resources and education of their children, these

enhanced “green spaces” will provide convenient access points to nature in the neighborhoods where these properties are situated. Additionally, communities will benefit from the restoration of species to their native habitat. Witnessing their return and joyful presence as well as the role that each of the species plays within the larger ecosystem will hopefully help the community understand how we, as humans, are not apart from nature but rather an integral part of nature.

Mr. Reese and his students have already been collecting data on local bird species in the community using technology and other resources from community partners, specifically at a local natural area as well as our school property, and have been able to see the stark contrast between these sites and their respective populations, which are situated only a few blocks from each other. They will also be doing biodiversity assessments and calculations to quantify the “biodiversity index” of each site and will have data they can statistically analyze to quantifiably measure the suspected impact of their solution.

Currently, David Reese is interested in recruiting a team of Audubon members to volunteer with students to educate them about local bird species and habitat at Pratt Academy. This effort may expand in the future to include advocating with SPS to make this a district-wide project. Interested members should contact David Reese directly, and he will organize the next steps. His contact information is: (509) 992-3947, or by email at davidre@spokaneschools.org.



Rendition of the Carla Olman Peperzak Middle School



American Crow

BIRD OF THE WEEK

American Bird Conservancy



American Crow
© Henry Burton

The American Crow is widespread in North America and, like the Blue Jay, is often maligned and misunderstood. In folklore, the crow is sometimes associated with witchcraft and evil, or is thought to signify misfortune and even death. One popular term for a group of crows is a “murder”! Often considered a pest, the bird’s name is used in association with stuffed manikins and movie characters — scarecrows — meant to frighten the birds from crops. Other cultures appreciate the crow’s intelligence and adaptability, portraying it as an ingenious trickster that can foresee the future, and that sometimes helps humankind.

Male and female American Crows look alike, with all-black plumage that has an iridescent purple sheen in direct light. *Corvus*, the first part of the American Crow’s scientific name, simply means “crow,” and its species name *brachyrhynchos* means “short beak” — which is true only in comparison to its larger, similar-looking relative the Common Raven. The crow’s beak is actually fairly large — 2.5 inches long — stout, and slightly hooked, with stiff bristles over the nostrils.

This common bird is an uncommonly intelligent survivor, able to cope with human pressures that have almost eradicated many bird species. Researchers trying to trap them for studies find that they are

not easy to trick, and once caught are not normally fooled the same way twice. They deftly avoid cars on busy roads where these birds forage for carrion, and loiter around trash on pick-up days, poking at bags between rush hours.

Surviving a Killer Virus

In the summer of 1999, the West Nile virus, a virulent, mosquito-borne disease, reached the United States, first appearing in New York City. West Nile affects birds as well as people and is particularly lethal to crows and jays, with an almost 100-percent mortality rate. Thousands of American Crows died from the virus in the first few months after it appeared. Millions more succumbed as West Nile swept across North America.

Although the initial impact of West Nile virus on the American Crow was significant, numbers have started to bounce back. Scientists from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, using data from the North American Breeding Bird Survey, found that West Nile virus became less lethal as it spread westward, and that crows in more diverse habitats were less likely to contract the virus. As of 2021, the American Crow seemed to be past what had seemed a potentially devastating hurdle.



Common Raven vs. American Crow
Audubon Society

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Counting Crows



The American Crow has a wide range, from Canada throughout the continental United States. It is resident in the lower two-thirds of this area and along Canada's Atlantic coast. Across interior Canada, it is a breeding resident, joining brethren to the south during the harsh winter months.

During the winter, American Crows gather in large roosts each evening — sometimes in the hundreds of thousands. These corvid congregations provide warmth, shelter, and protection from nighttime predators such as the Great Horned Owl. Roosts are often located in suburban and even urban areas, where artificial lighting makes it possible for the crows to spot approaching threats, and where human-made structures provide extra shelter from the elements.

Researchers have found that these roosts also serve as information hubs: A study of Hooded Crows, a related Eurasian species, found that from roosts, some of the birds followed others on their daily commutes to learn new feeding areas. Such "intel" is especially important in winter, when food is scarce. Crow roosts break up at the beginning of the breeding season, usually around March.

The most familiar call of the American Crow is a repeated "caw-caw." Different types of caws are used to alert other crows to predators, to declare territory, or while mobbing enemies such as hawks and owls. The American Crow also produces a variety of other sounds including rattles, coos, and clicks, sometimes strung together into a long, rambling "song." It also mimics other birds such as the Barred Owl, and can imitate cats, dogs, and even human voices!



-  = Core Habitat
-  = Marginal Habitat

SAS members helped restore grouse habitat this fall

By Madonna Luers

This fall several Spokane Audubon Society (SAS) members helped restore Sharp-tailed Grouse and other wildlife habitat altered by drainage or fires.

On October 23, seven chapter members -- Cindy Bunnell, Lorna and James Emerich, Teri Gruber, Lindell Haggin, Debbie Stempf, and Kim Thorburn -- helped plant 100 two-gallon birch trees on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) property off South Telford Road in Lincoln County.

The property had been drained and farmed in the past, but now riparian or streamside habitat is taking shape with plantings. The birch trees planted this fall were a continuation of an effort to restore riparian birch groves used by wintering sharptails and other birds for both food and roosts. BLM wildlife biologist Jason Lowe reports birches from earlier plantings hosted Eastern Kingbird and American Robin nests last Spring. The young trees planted this fall are doing well so far, thanks to recent abundant rain.

On November 6, nine chapter members -- Rachel Brabeck, Cindy Bunnell, Lorna and James Emerich, Lindell Haggin, Lucy Larkin, Madonna Luers, Debbie Stempf, and Kim Thorburn -- helped plant over 5,000 small shrubs and forbs at Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area in Lincoln County where last year's wildfires destroyed grouse and other wildlife habitat.

Juli Anderson, who oversees management of Swanson Lakes among other northeast properties for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), reports the plants are doing well and invites everyone interested to visit the area in the spring to see the "fruits of their labors."

Both planting projects also had participation by Inland Northwest Wildlife Council (INWC) members. Plant purchases for the WDFW project were supported by donations from both non-profit groups.



Cindy Bunnell and Debbie Stempf

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.

Details of the field trips will be found on our website <https://www.audubonspokane.org/upcoming-events>.



The Pygmy Owl
Spokane Audubon Society
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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 memberships provide ongoing support for our many conservation and educational activities.

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