

A voice for education and conservation in the natural world
Rogue Valley Audubon Society
www.roguevalleyaudubon.org

Deadline for the March issue is February 20



Virtual FEBRUARY Program

Tuesday, February 23 at 7:00 pm

“Vaux’s Happening: 15 million and Counting”

Presented by LARRY SCHWITTERS

The Audubon’s Vaux’s Happening Project began in 2007 as a successful effort to save a school chimney that was one of only two well-known big number Vaux’s Swift roost sites in Washington State. This chimney is now recognized as a PIF Globally Significant Important Bird Area. The project quickly expanded into an attempt to locate, raise awareness of, and hopefully preserve the important roost sites used by this species all along their migratory path. The project has now documented over 200 roosting sites from the Yukon to Guatemala used by over 15 million swifts in the last 26 migrations. Of special interest to conservationists in southern Oregon is a large roost in Medford very much in need of preserving. We will discuss how to do

that. Schwitters will also share images and information captured by the project’s chimney surveillance cameras, precision temperature recorders, and radio tracking transmitters.

Larry Schwitters earned a Master of Science degree from East Texas State University. He spent 30 years in the trenches of public education, mostly as a middle school science teacher and coach in the Renton, Wash. School District. After an early retirement, his first involvement with the avian Apodidae family was Black Swift field research for the American Bird Conservancy. His experiences in this endeavor were the subject of the cover story for the American Birding Association’s *Winging It* magazine. His last 13 years have focused on the smaller Vaux’s Swift. His efforts are covered in the *Birder’s World* featured article, “46 Minutes of WOW.” Recently published by Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s *Birds of the World* is the Vaux’s Swift species update that Schwitters and his grandson put together.

Zoom instructions: The February chapter meeting will be live on Zoom on Feb. 23. If you’re already signed up, you won’t need to sign up again. To sign up for the first time, attendees will need to register by Feb. 22 via a new mailing list created just for RVAS Zoom events. Click on this link (<https://www.roguevalleyaudubon.org/zoom-signup/>) to register. After you register, you will be sent an email with the Zoom link and again on the day of the event.

Please check your junk mail as the messages can end up there. Contact RVAS via the website if you don’t receive the link on the stated dates.

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Chapter Program meetings are held on the fourth Tuesday of the month, September through April, at 7:00 pm. Meetings take place at 1801 E. Jackson St., Medford, in Lidgate Hall of the Medford Congregational Church.

NOTE: Until further notice, chapter meetings will be held on Zoom.

A Report on the Bear Creek Greenway

By Jon Deason

As members of the community, we all share in the heart-break of the Alameda Fire. The loss of life, homes, businesses and severe impact on the communities along the way affected each of us in some way. Being a birder and environmentalist, my individual focus soon turned to the Bear Creek Greenway. That wonderful stretch of protected habitat that my birding group visited several times a year (before COVID-19) was not only severely damaged but, in my mind, threatened.

The Greenway was the corridor of the fire. With the help of a strong south wind it became a canopy fire, sending burning embers to spread the massive damage across Ashland, Talent, and Phoenix, and threatening Central Point. My main concern was that reaction to this would create a "clear-cut mentality" that would limit the regrowth of mature tree stands and not leave large amounts of snags for future habitat. I also hoped that there would be a realization that the massive growth of non-native blackberries was a major cause of the intensity of the fire.

I was in luck. As an Audubon board member, I was able to share my individual concerns with an organization that could listen to my concerns and make them their own, and take action if necessary. The board agreed to have me look into the issue and report back. My report back was brief and encouraging.

The very first meeting (by phone) removed most of the concerns. It was with Steve Lambert, Manager of Jackson County Parks. The Parks Department is in charge of coordinating the complex jurisdictions involved in the Greenway including: county, five cities, ODOT, Fish and Wildlife. Steve assured me that the early active removal of trees along the Bike Path was for safety reasons and there are no plans to do a massive removal of trees and most will be left. The planning phase for each entity is just beginning and will take some time but there is a growing realization of the role of the blackberries. The removal of the berries will be expensive and beyond the means of any of the cities involved. Steve is already looking into outside funding for this and the planting of native plants.

Our entry into this issue was useful not only because it removed concerns, but demonstrated the fact that we have a local group of diverse organizations, working together to protect the Greenway in an environmental way. We should be thankful for that – we environmentalists are not always so lucky. We will continue to report back on the progress of restoring the Greenway and watch for any problems.

2020 Ashland Christmas Bird Count

By Carol Mockridge, Co-coordinator

The count did go on, despite COVID. Our scaled-down version had only 49 participants, several of whom only counted in their yards and neighborhoods.

There were 111 species counted on the foggy, cold count day and three additional species added during count week. Like the Medford count, the Ashland Count was down from the last three years in both species and individual birds. Only 13,124 individual birds were counted this year, probably due to the drop in participants and dense fog that lasted most of the day in some areas. Robins still came in first place at 1,704, followed by Dark-eyed Juncos at 1,252 and Gold-crowned Sparrows at 1,105.

Two stories at our Zoom after-count meeting highlighted what made this count memorable. Three teams had surprising looks at a pod of American White Pelicans cruising up Bear Creek. That species is rarely (if ever) seen on the Ashland count and caused great excitement. Recounting their favorite moment, Andres Carvalhaes and Jonathan Pope spotted some action near Belle Fiore Winery in Area 7 on a hillside. Two Golden Eagles and several Common Ravens were feasting on a deer carcass. It doesn't get much better than that.

Unique species found by only one team

Frank Lospalluto added the most unique species by locating the Sooty Grouse, Great Horned Owl, Northern Saw-whet Owl and Townsend's Solitaire in Area 10. Dick Ashford and John Bullock scored the Ring Neck Pheasant, Rough-legged Hawk and Northern Shrike in Area 1. John Alexander and Shannon Rio's team added the Canvas-back and Virginia Rail and one of the pelican sightings. Janet Kelley's area near Ashland Pond produced the only Tricolored Blackbirds. Vince Zauskey and Candace Burton scouting in Area 4 found the recurring White-throated Sparrow in North Mountain Park and the Double-crested Cormorant (count week). Team five's Carol Mockridge and Stewart Janes found the only Hutton's Vireo and Lee French found his resident Western Screech Owl nestled in the box in his yard. One Northern Pintail was spotted by Linda and Peter Kreisman in Area 7. Brandon Breen led Area 8 for the first time around Emigrant Lake and recorded seven Common Mergansers and a Rock Wren.

Rene Allen summed up this year's count by saying that while area leaders put great effort often counting solo or with one other person, we look forward to being together again with one big team.

Wanted: New RVAS Treasurer

By Susan Stone, Treasurer

This June I will be resigning as treasurer. We need someone to step in and take my place. I am happy to train you. In general, you would spend about one to two hours per week keeping track of incoming renewals, paying bills and keeping records of expenditures, etc. Please email me at weaverstone86@gmail.com if you are interested. It is vital that we find someone to take my place starting in June. Thank you!

Renew Your Membership...or Join RVAS

Feeling inspired to renew your membership? Ready to join RVAS for the first time? Find our membership form on our website at www.roguevalleyaudubon.org and click on the "Donate" button at the top of the page.

Or print our good-old-fashioned paper form from the October or November 2020 issues of *The Chat*: <https://www.roguevalleyaudubon.org/newsletter-archive/>

2020 Medford Christmas Bird Count Summary

By Bob Hunter

Participation in the Medford Christmas Bird Count has been growing over the last several years, but due to COVID-19, participation unfortunately had to be limited this year. While last year there were 17 parties and 71 participants, this year there were 18 parties with only 38 participants. Even with fewer participants there was still a tremendous effort put in by the teams with 124.6 total party hours and 381 total miles.

Species numbers and individual birds counted were down this year, perhaps because of the reduced participation. There were 119 species counted on count day with six additional species seen during count week. Only 36,448 individual birds were counted this year which was less than the total individual count of robins alone last year (56,543). Robins were still the most numerous bird this year with 7,718 counted. European starlings were a close second with 7,009 individuals.

Though bird numbers were down overall, we still had a count high of 42 canvasbacks (previous high was 29) on Mingus Pond; Acorn Woodpeckers, Double Crested Cormorants, Downy Woodpeckers, Ruby-crowned Kinglets and Wild Turkeys approached previous high numbers.

Stewart Janes' team covering the west side of the count circle had a team high 92 species, including the count's lone Hutton's Vireo as well as the count's only Horned Larks (28). Norm Barret's team had the second most species (84) including the count's only Snow Geese (4), Pacific Wren (1) and Spotted Sandpiper (1). Jade Keehn's team was able to locate the Agate Lake Burrowing Owl for the count and also saw the count's only Western Grebe. Only one pheasant was counted again this year by Bob Hunter on the Denman Wildlife Area near Whetstone Pond. In addition, there were four Black-crowned Night Herons roosting in the willows along the pond's edge. Vince Zauskey's team found the count's only Loggerhead Shrike and Bob Hunter found two Northern Shrikes for the count. Lynn Kellogg's team found the count's only Eared Grebes (3). For only the 7th time in the count an American Bittern was located by Gretchen Hunter at Wilson's Pond. To top things off Sooney Viani's team found two Northern Pygmy Owls.

Tom Phillips found a Barred Owl and White-throated Sparrow in Medford for two count week birds. It is the first Barred Owl to appear in the Medford Christmas Bird count. Frank Lospalluto found a Short-eared Owl at Denman during count week and Norm Barrett had a Great-tailed Grackle for count week. Next year we will have to get these birds on count day.

We hope to be able to have everyone back participating next year!



Two views of a Loggerhead Shrike
Photos by Frank Lospalluto

The Conservation Column

By Pepper Trail

Happy February! Happy, happy February! Beginning with this month's Conservation Column, I look forward to having a lot more (well...any) good news to share than I have for the past four years.

For a while, though, the good news will consist mostly of reversal of some of the worst environmental actions of the Trump Administration. Those are tremendously important, but will just get us back to where we were at the end of the Obama Administration. Our long-term goal must be to advocate for truly enhanced protections for endangered species and wildlife habitats. Fortunately, it is now possible to imagine that increased protections could actually happen.

Biden Administration Environmental Reviews

On Inauguration Day, the Biden Administration released a list of over 100 Trump-era executive orders under scrutiny, directing federal agencies to reverse, review or revoke any environmental policies that are "harmful to public health, damaging to the environment, unsupported by the best available science, or otherwise not in the national interest." These Trump Administration's rule gutting the Migratory Bird Treaty Act—the most effective bird conservation policy in our nation's include:

- Review of the history;
- A temporary halt to oil and gas development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, one of America's most important bird nurseries. This immediate action is critical as lease sales began this month;
- Review of the Trump Administration's opening of the Tongass National Forest, the world's largest intact temperate rainforest, to logging and other development
- Revisiting controversial endangered-species listing and delisting decisions, including those for monarch butterflies, gray wolves, Greater Sage Grouse, and Northern Spotted Owls
- Examining the very last-minute (January 15) removal of almost 3.5 million acres public forestland in Oregon, Washington, and California from protections as designated critical habitat for the Northern Spotted Owl. This outrageous decision is described in more detail below.
- Rejoining the Paris Climate Agreement, an important global accord to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and cancelling the Keystone XL oil pipeline.

Elimination of Northern Spotted Owl Critical Habitat

In December, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determined that the Northern Spotted Owl meets the definition of an endangered species, a more serious status than its current "threatened" listing. The bird has lost more than 70 percent of its population since the FWS listed it as threatened in 1990. It faces a real threat of extinction.

Nonetheless, the agency said it would not elevate the bird's listing to endangered because doing so "is precluded by higher priority actions." That decision angered conservation groups, who accused the FWS of shirking its duty. (At the same time, FWS also made a "justified-but-precluded" decision relating to the monarch butterfly, declining to list that species despite declines of over 80% in the eastern U.S. and virtual collapse of western populations).

On January 15, five days before President Biden's inauguration, the Trump Administration compounded its attack on Spotted Owls with a final rule that removes nearly 3.5 million acres from the Northern Spotted Owl's designated critical habitat: areas determined to be essential for a species to recover. This was a dramatic expansion of a much more modest 200,000-acre cut proposed in August—a change made at the discretion of Interior Secretary David Bernhardt with no chance for the public to comment.

"The owl should be endangered because it's in danger of going extinct in the near term, and yet we have this decision from the Fish and Wildlife Service, driven by political appointees, that says: Nope, we're gonna get rid of protected habitat," says Susan Jane Brown, a staff attorney for the Western Environmental Law Center. "It's really heartbreaking, frankly. This kind of callous action is just offensive."

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Endangered Species Act expert Patrick Parenteau, a Vermont Law School professor, said in an email, “I’ve never seen that dramatic a cut in critical habitat and never for a species that warrants up listing from threatened to endangered.”

Habitat loss driven primarily by timber harvesting led to the Northern Spotted Owl’s “threatened” listing and put it at the center of intense fights in the 1990s that pitted loggers against environmentalists in the Pacific Northwest and led to the adoption of the Northwest Forest Plan. Today the bird faces additional threats from increasingly devastating wildfires in its forest habitat and competition from Barred Owls, an eastern species that has expanded its range into the Northern Spotted Owl’s home turf. Safeguarding its habitat is vital to helping it evade and survive these threats, experts say.

Timber companies, chafing at restrictions on logging, have repeatedly challenged critical habitat designations for the owl, including a 2012 rule that set aside 9.5 million acres of forest. That lawsuit remained tied up in the courts until last April, when the FWS reached a settlement with the American Forest Resource Council, a timber industry lobbying group, requiring it to re-evaluate designated habitat.

The outcome of that process was a FWS proposal in August to remove some 200,000 acres of critical habitat in Oregon. But timber companies said the proposal didn’t go far enough. In formal comments on the plan, the American Forest Resource Council argued that the FWS should remove a total of 2.7 million acres.

The new rule goes further still, stripping more than one-third of the Northern Spotted Owl’s critical habitat in California, Oregon, and Washington. Brown says she’s heard from multiple contacts in federal agencies that the increase from 200,000 acres to 3.5 million acres came at the direction of Bernhardt and another Interior official, who “put the screws” to agency staff to give timber companies greater access. She says government biologists have described to her the reduction in protected habitat as an “extinction action” for the bird.

The FWS declined to answer questions about concerns that the new rule could push the Northern Spotted Owl toward extinction and instead sent Audubon a statement from FWS Director Aurelia Skipwith: “The Trump Administration and the Service are committed to recovering all imperiled species, and the northern spotted owl is no exception. These commonsense revisions ensure we are continuing to recover the northern spotted owl while being a good neighbor to rural communities within the critical habitat.”



To explain the more than 15-fold increase in removed acreage, the rule refers to the Interior secretary’s authority, via the Endangered Species Act, to exclude areas from critical habitat if the benefits of doing so outweigh the benefits of including it. But that discretion has limits; the law prohibits exclusions if they will cause the extinction of a species and requires that they be rooted in the best available science.

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“This decision blows past those limits like few decisions I have seen from this administration, which is saying something,” Brown says. “Saying, ‘I have the discretion to push it into extinction’ does not pass the laugh test.”

Brown says she doesn’t see how a judge would allow such a sweeping action by the secretary without public comment, and her group will sue to reverse it. The incoming Biden administration is also likely to scrap the rule since it doesn’t take effect for 60 days, she says. Still, doing so will require the FWS to write a replacement rule, which takes time—something of which the Northern Spotted Owl has little to spare.

Finally, to close on a positive note, there was some very good news close to home:

Federal Energy Regulatory Commission Upholds Oregon’s Denial of Key Jordan Cove LNG Permit

On January 19, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) upheld the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality’s denial of a key permit for the proposed Jordan Cove LNG export terminal and Pacific Connector fracked gas pipeline. The pipeline would carry fracked natural gas 229 miles from Malin, Oregon, to Coos Bay, impacting hundreds of rivers, streams, and wetlands. The Jordan Cove LNG project cannot move forward without a Clean Water Act approval from the state of Oregon.

This is the latest in a series of regulatory losses for Jordan Cove LNG, representing a huge blow to the 15-year-old proposal that has been vehemently opposed by tribes, impacted landowners, fishermen, climate advocates, and others. The project has also not qualified for other critical state, federal, and local permits needed to move forward. In its summary of today’s meeting, FERC wrote: “The order finds that Jordan Cove and Pacific Connector never requested certification with respect to the Commission authorizations for the Jordan Cove Energy Project and that the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality could not have waived its authority to issue certification for a request it never received.”

“Today’s unanimous FERC decision shows that when our communities come together and speak out, we win! Thousands of southern Oregonians have raised their voices to stop this project for years and will continue to until the threat of Jordan Cove LNG is gone for good,” said Hannah Sohl, executive director of Rogue Climate.

“Today’s decision is a huge win for clean water and healthy communities who’ve been fighting this harmful project for nearly 15 years,” said Robyn Janssen, director of Rogue Riverkeeper. “FERC’s decision to uphold Oregon’s 401 denial gives me hope that this is the end for Jordan Cove LNG.”

There are plenty of challenges ahead, but I sure feel like a weight has been lifted – don’t you?

Oak Knoll Golf Course Seeks Audubon International Certification for Golf Courses

By Patrk Oropallo, Manager of Oak Knoll Golf Course

In 2019 I enrolled Oak Knoll Golf Course in the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program (ACSP) for Golf Courses. Currently, 18 golf courses in Oregon hold this designation and I am excited for Oak Knoll to be the 19th. ACSP requires certification in six areas, including Environmental Planning, Wildlife and Habitat Management, Chemical Use Reduction and Safety, Water Conservation, Water Quality Management and Outreach & Education. I am happy to report that we are close to completing our environmental plan with certification on the horizon. In an effort to engage our community and satisfy certain elements of Wildlife and Habitat Management we will be soliciting volunteers to take bird counts on a monthly basis for use in our species identification wall and on our website. Sooney Viani and Mary Pat Power will be spearheading this effort; however, we will need more volunteers to make this a viable project in the long term. If you are interested in being a part of the monthly bird counts please contact Sooney Viani at sooneyviani@gmail.com or myself at patrick.oropallo@ashland.or.us. Thank you for considering supporting Oak Knoll Golf Course in its quest to become a leader for environmentally responsible golf courses.

First Surveys for the Bear Creek Community Bird Survey Completed

By Juliet Grable

By the time this newsletter lands in your mailbox or Inbox we will have completed both of the January surveys for our Bear Creek Greenway bird monitoring project. I'm happy to report that we've had overwhelming response to the project and the first surveys went off without a hitch.

Seventeen volunteers joined team leaders Nate Trimble, Frank Lospalluto, and Pepper Trail in early January as they visited the seven sites. Here are some highlights from those first outings:

Nate led surveys at Lynn Newbry and Blue Heron parks and Suncrest Rd. He reports that there are still a lot of birds, especially robins and starlings, using the Greenway. On the other hand, Nate observed that some formerly common birds were only detected in very small numbers. "For example, we only detected one Song Sparrow and just a few Spotted Towhees," he says. "I would have expected these to be two of the most common birds pre-fire, and I think it will be really interesting to see how shrub-dependent species do in the coming years."

Frank led surveys at North Mountain Park, Mingus Pond, and Dean Creek. Highlights at North Mountain Park included an adult Cooper's Hawk and five different Anna's Hummingbird males. "We also saw a Hutton's Vireo that provided a good ID challenge by comparing it to Ruby-crowned Kinglet, which are abundant during the winter in our area," says Frank. At Mingus Pond his team spotted close to three dozen Canvasbacks in the pond, along with a Belted Kingfisher, and at Dean Creek they witnessed over 15 Double-crested Cormorants fly over, likely heading from a roost site to a nearby pond. "Lots of Acorn Woodpeckers, singing Bewick's Wrens and Wrentits, and two different pairs of California Towhees made for a fun morning."

Pepper Trail reports from the Ashland site: "It was particularly sad to see the area on the B part of the transect, once full of willows and blackberries, that was home to Wrentits, now completely burned and barren. Despite all the hostility toward blackberries, they do provide favored habitat for wrentits, towhees, and wintering sparrows. On the positive side, the big ponderosa pine granary tree on the A part of the transect, though scorched, is still being used by Acorn Woodpeckers. It remains to be seen if that tree will survive, but even as a snag, it could serve as a granary for many years."

The non-avian highlight at the Ashland site was spotting five otters sunning, snuggling, and grooming each other on the bank just above the beaver dam on Ashland Creek.

"We just took a quick look as we were doing the survey, but on our way back they were still there, so we could watch them to our heart's content," says Pepper. "As we watched, a Great Blue Heron flew in and landed right next to them. They momentarily startled, but then they all settled down and heron and otters ignored each other. It was really wonderful to watch them."

If you would like to volunteer or learn more about the project, please visit our new page dedicated to the project at <https://www.roguevalleyaudubon.org/bear-creek-surveys/> or email me at bearcreekbirdsurvey@gmail.com

Update on Bear Creek Monitoring and Restoration

By Juliet Grable

On January 22, Rogue Valley Sewer Services and Rogue Riverkeeper hosted a public meeting so they and their partners could update interested citizens about the collaborative efforts to monitor and restore Bear Creek following the Almeda Fire. I'm pleased to report that there is a great effort on many fronts to monitor water quality and pollutants, control erosion, reseed, and prevent toxins and sediment from flowing into the creek. One of the priorities is to focus revegetation efforts to control the return of non-native Himalayan blackberries. This effort is happening at the federal, state, county, and local level, with the help of nonprofits like Rogue Riverkeeper and Lomakatsi and dozens of volunteers.

To view the presentation, visit

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1MWGdSBxFQvHIVk_JZV1PkNkoPcoxWG2D/view

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Status of upcoming events

Field Trips: Suspended until further notice.

Chapter meetings: Virtual until further notice. Check website for updates.

May Birdathon: To be determined.

May Picnic: To be determined.



Spotted Owl
by Frank Lospalluto


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