

## Birding in the New Year

By Stephen Shunk

New Year's resolutions either inspire or intimidate. Some statistics surely prove their failure tendency, but statistics themselves prove unreliable and suspect. This year I'm taking a new tack. Rather than paving that sinking path of good intentions by trying to lose weight or clean up my office, I'm choosing to focus on my great enabler: birding. After all, what could more reliably inspire distraction and procrastination than spending more time outside with the birds?

So, here's the deal. I'm choosing five Oregon bird species with which I wish to spend more time in 2004. My selection criteria preclude species that would require an inordinate amount of time to locate or those that only make a rare or fleeting pass through the region. Birds in the top five must maintain predictable schedules, in whatever season they visit the state. Diversity will keep the quest lively, so five different families should be



represented. Finally, simplicity leads to boredom, one of the most reliable obstacles to progress, therefore challenge will be a critical element of this adventure (New Year's "adventures" sound better than resolutions). *Photo: White-throated Sparrow*

Challenge, diversity, and predictability together seem complementary enough. The final criterion, accountability, presents the biggest trial. Most resolutions crumble under their absence of accountability. Thus, for this New Year's adventure, I remain accountable to the readers of this column. For 2004, I will dedicate one monthly column to each of the five chosen birds, reporting on where and when to find them and sharing a slew of interesting facts and trivia about their lives. In case that's not enough accountability, I also invite you to join me in the field for any field study opportunities described below. Birders of all skill levels are needed to assist with a wide range of bird conservation projects. On to the adventure.

One of my favorite High Desert birds is the Gray Flycatcher. This pint-sized, ash-colored bird returns to nest each spring in juniper woodlands east of the Cascades. Occasionally, Gray Flycatchers will also nest in the ponderosa pine forests on the western edge of the juniper belt. The East Cascades Bird Conservancy will continue this summer with their Gray Flycatcher study on the Crooked River National Grasslands. The purpose of the

project is to assess the nest site preferences for the flycatcher, in addition to documenting other species that nest in the grasslands. Grasslands biologists will utilize the data to ensure that habitat management activities don't adversely affect the regional population of this sensitive species. I resolve to continue my own surveys for the project and to assist my fellow surveyors with their Gray Flycatcher nest-searches.

The Three-toed Woodpecker may be the most elusive of Oregon's 12 nesting woodpecker species. Despite the fact that "three-toes" reside year-round in the Cascades and Blue Mountains, the species seems adept at sneaking under the radar. The 90,000-acre B&B Fire of summer 2003 burned through wide swaths of three-toe habitat. Fortunately, the species shows a particular taste for the larvae of beetles that inhabit burned forests. For nesting, Three-toed Woodpeckers seem to prefer higher elevation lodgepole pine and mixed conifer forests, especially those near recent burns. Opportunities to find and study Three-toed Woodpeckers will abound in the Cascades this summer. In addition to their Gray Flycatcher work, the East Cascades Bird Conservancy will be studying woodpeckers in burned forests, and I resolve to learn more about the behavior and distribution of Oregon's Three-toed Woodpeckers.

The enigmatic Solitary Sandpiper occurs across the state, primarily in spring and fall migration. However, at least three times, the species has been all but confirmed nesting in Oregon. Two of those records included birds aggressively and vocally defending territories in the Cascades, and the third came from the Blue Mountains. Normally, Solitary Sandpipers nest in the boreal forests of Canada and Alaska. In fact, they are the only species of North American shorebird to actually nest in trees (most shorebirds nest on the ground). In the boreal forest, solitaires utilize abandoned nests of American Robins and Rusty Blackbirds, among other species. Solitary Sandpipers can be found along the edges of small puddles and ponds, and even at local sewage lagoons, but mostly away from the coast and rarely in alkali deserts. Spring migrants move through in late April and early May; fall migrants may be found most easily in August or September. The real trick is trying to confirm whether these birds actually nest in Oregon. I resolve



to spend time at higher altitude bogs and swamps this summer searching for evidence of nesting Solitary Sandpipers. Any takers? *(Photo: Yellow Billed Loon)*

Another favorite Oregon bird that deserves more attention is the Western Scrub-Jay. Sometimes referred to as a "blue jay," this crestless jay species sports a light gray belly and throat with blue wings and head. The actual Blue Jay resides primarily east of the Rocky Mountains. Oregon's crested jay, the Steller's Jay, lives primarily in the mountainous areas of the state, although it occurs widely across Western Oregon. The Scrub-Jay, our focal species, can easily be found in the Willamette Valley and Southwest Oregon, and it seems to be expanding its territory east of the Cascades. One outlying population lives in southern Lake County, another occupies southern Klamath County, and a third population has expanded into Central Oregon, with many birds breeding annually in Bend. Birders in Sisters, Redmond and Prineville frequently report Scrub-Jays, and a few birds have even been seen recently in

northern Harney County. The Western Scrub-Jay has a story to tell, and I resolve to spend time studying the species' expansion in Oregon.

For my final New Year's bird, I will focus on the Golden-crowned Sparrow. This species spends the winter in Oregon, with most of the state's visiting population found in the Willamette Valley. Golden-crowns are rather large, plain brown sparrows with long tails, two white wing bars, and faded markings on the head. In the spring, their subdued crowns begin turning a bright gold and black. Golden-crowns have only been documented breeding in Oregon once, when a pair fledged four young near Coos Bay in 1982. In 2002, volunteer birders with the East Cascades Bird Conservancy observed two adult golden-crowns at Camp Polk Meadow near Sisters that appeared to be visiting a possible nest site. No nest could be located. Will this bird breed again in Oregon? Any Golden-crowned Sparrows seen in the state into June should be watched closely for breeding behaviors, such as birds carrying nesting material. I resolve to watch Golden-crowns more closely this spring and summer to help increase our knowledge of this species in Oregon.

There you have it: five species of birds to watch for in 2004. I look forward to reporting back on my progress and, for once, actually achieving my New Year's resolutions. Keep in touch and feel free to share your own encounters with these particularly inspiring Oregon birds.

## The Birds of Christmas Present

by Stephen Shunk

Like ghosts from winters past, Snow Buntings, Redpolls and Rosy-Finches return to adorn the Oregon landscape like crystalline ornaments in a forest of barren, lonely trees. Across the state, and indeed the continent, the birds of summer have now mostly gone. Yet, in their place flocks the hardier set, hailing from the Great White North, in search of more daylight hours, milder climes and more productive foraging grounds.

Winter brings more than snow and ice. It brings Tundra Swans to unfrozen waters and Red-breasted Sapsuckers to the mixed woods of the West. Biting cold fronts push the



Winter Wren and Varied Thrush southward, along with Merlin and Northern Shrike. Golden-crowned Sparrows settle into the region, joined occasionally by their close cousins, the White-throated and **Harris's sparrows**. In turn, winter birds bring the most anticipated and celebratory event in every birder's year, the Christmas Bird Count.

This holiday season, more than 55,000 birders from across the Western Hemisphere will participate in the 104th annual Christmas Bird Count (CBC), sponsored by the National Audubon Society. And count birds they will. Last season, these avian enthusiasts tallied

nearly 73 million birds in over 1,900 individual count circles from Alaska to Chile. Of course, Chilean birders enjoy summer weather during CBC their endeavor, while North American birders must brave whatever winter offers on the day of their schedule counts.

Northern Alaska birders, without the hope of sunshine, will count Common Ravens that linger across the frozen tundra. Oregonians may at least hope for sun, although a mountain blizzard or maritime gale will certainly sweep the state some time in the three-week count period between December 14 and January 5. Birders on the inaugural Sisters CBC in 1999 braved 15-degree ice fog. Some Coastal Oregon aviphiles counted birds last winter through the horizontal rain.

Why do they do it? Some would say for the camaraderie of their fellow birders, and others would say they just like counting birds. Perhaps the most significant reason for participating in the CBC is the chance to contribute to the longest running ornithological database in history and its use as a vital tool in bird species and habitat conservation.

The CBC tradition fledged on Christmas Day in 1900, when 27 conservationists diverged from another long-standing holiday practice of the era known as the "side hunt." In the hunt, teams competed to see who could shoot the most birds and small mammals. Ornithologist Frank Chapman proposed that his group could just count the birds instead of killing them, and hence was born one of the most important citizen-based conservation efforts in history.

The data collected from more than 100 years of CBCs reveal important information about the winter distribution of various bird species as well as population trends among resident and migratory birds. The CBC provides a key tool for governments and other organizations that are responsible for habitat management and conservation. Among all the sciences, none relies more on volunteer data collection than ornithology, and the Christmas Bird Count engages more volunteers than any other avian survey project.

CBC teams count every bird they see and hear in a 24-hour period within a 15-mile-diameter count circle, enclosing approximately 177 square miles. Oregon alone will host 49 different counts for the 104th CBC. Counting occurs from midnight to midnight, with the most eccentric birders counting owls in winter's brisk wee hours.

Birders of all skill and ability levels are encouraged to join in the festivities. Most teams have expert birders to help identify all the different species, so participants only have to know how to count. Backyard feeder-watchers also provide important contributions to each count circle, so folks with limited mobility or other restrictions can still contribute.

Get out and count some birds this holiday season. Join the circle in your area or visit some place in our beautiful state that you have never seen. Make a difference in supporting wildlife conservation. Oregon has some great birds, and you can help keep it that way.

For a complete listing of the CBC circles in Oregon and the contact information for each circle, visit <http://www.oregonbirds.org>.

-- Stephen Shunk

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