

The Skagit Flyer

Skagit Audubon Society
A Chapter of National Audubon Society

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October Meeting and Program RAPTORS OF NORTHWEST WASHINGTON *Presented by Sue Cottrell*

Tuesday, Oct. 8th
7:00 Social; 7:30 Program
Padilla Bay Interpretive Center
10441 Bayview Edison Road
Mt. Vernon, Washington



Sue Cottrell has been studying birds of prey and guiding outdoor trips for more than 30 years, including trapping and banding raptors as a volunteer of the Falcon Research Group. A resident of Whatcom County, she is one of the lucky ones that can say she has had several "5 falcon days". She will give an introduction with a slide show to raptors that we have here in NW WA, as well as share her current research and photos of her latest projects working with Red-tailed Hawks and American Kestrels.

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FOUND

**A rubber lens cover for a pair of
Swarovski binoculars was found
on the Sept. 8th field trip.
Contact Neil O'Hara at
781.290.9083 to arrange for
pick-up.**

OCTOBER FIELDTRIPS, by Libby Mills

Beginning birders and friends are always welcome on Skagit Audubon field trips. Membership in Skagit Audubon is encouraged but not required for participation. Please be prepared for the weather with suitable clothing and bring field guides, binoculars and spotting scopes (if you have them). Carpool whenever possible and contribute to the driver's expense. Watch the email reminders for the latest information, including any changes and/or additions to the field trip schedule. To be added to the email distribution list contact Libby Mills: libbymills@gmail.com. **NOTE:** If you plan to join a trip, contact the leader the day before to ensure a successful rendezvous. Trip plans may change.



Port Susan Bay; Classic Autumn Coastal Birding

Wednesday, Oct. 23rd; 8 am to 12:00 Noon

Leader: Jeff Osmundson; 360.435.4297; jeffo4297@gmail.com

Meet at the Stanwood QFC/Starbucks parking lot about 8 am. After introductions we will travel the short distance to the water treatment plant to see the birds congregated on the ponds inside the perimeter of the fence. Plan to be here until about 10 am and then travel to Port Susan Bay for the incoming tide. Opportunities for shorebirds, ducks, and early arriving swans or geese. Finish about noon depending on the tide and the birds. Dress for the weather and bring appropriate gear and snacks. Scopes are useful if you have them.

South Fidalgo Island; Deception Pass State Park; Rosario Head and Lake Erie

Saturday; Oct. 26th; 8:30 am to 12:00 Noon

Leader: Phil Wright; 360.299.8212; phil@skagitaudubon.org

The varied habitats near Deception Pass, from old growth forest to the open waters off Rosario Head, attract a variety of birdlife. Expect to see winter songbirds, waterfowl, gulls and other seabirds. Past trips have yielded Brandt's, Pelagic and Double-Crested Cormorants, Belted Kingfishers, several ducks and gull species, and more. We will drive to Lake Erie below Mt. Erie after the Deception Pass foray to look for the several species of ducks and waterfowl that we didn't see at Rosario. Discover Pass (parking permit) required. Meet at March Point Park and Ride at 8:30 am to carpool and dress for the weather. Bring appropriate gear and snacks; scopes are useful if you have them.

FROM YOUR EDITOR, Growing up, my family spent a few years in Vermont, and each autumn, kids looked forward to raking huge piles of leaves, jumping into them, and raking them into various patterns like the Starship Enterprise! At the time, we didn't give any thought to how the leaves would benefit the gardens and wildlife but our parents did. Mountains of leaves were raked onto garden beds or shrub borders where they decomposed during the winter, providing mulch as well as fertilizer. Leaves also provide winter homes for all sorts of bugs, beetles, caterpillars, butterflies, moths and the like. Birds benefit from the leaves because they find seeds and bugs hidden underneath them. Leaves also provide valuable mulch helping to protect roots and plants from freezing, thawing and re-freezing again. Leaves help to conserve moisture or to keep excess moisture from collecting around the crowns of plants which could lead to root or crown rot and loss of the plant. Leaves that collect on a sidewalk or mat down on a lawn can be raked or chopped as mulch and spread around garden beds or shrub borders to add nutrients to the soil and provide winter homes for all sorts of little critters. So – in short – please try to **Leave the Leaves** whenever possible! Mary Sinker

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE from Jeff Osmundson

In Support of a Messy Garden

Greetings Skagit Audubon members and friends -

Not everybody has a yard or garden on the property where they live. But, if you do, there is a growing trend to be a little less tidy and a little messier. Colleen and I have been gardening longer than we have been birding and we have often had a vegetable garden as well as lawn and permanent plantings. In the past we felt we were good stewards of the garden when we cleaned up each fall and planted cover crops, usually annual ryegrass of some sort. But no longer. For a number of reasons the vegetable garden has been left fallow for a couple of years and has rewarded us with volunteer potatoes, sunflowers and cosmos. The yard and plantings are messier now in the fall to provide feed and cover for our winter birds and bugs. We now try to minimize our cleanup to things that really need to be done. For example, our big leaf maple drops leaves that mat on the yard and those need to be ground up and spread out.

In general, plants that offer those gorgeous flowers in the summer can also provide both cover and food for the winter residents of the yard. We constantly see juncos, towhee, white crowned sparrows, goldfinch, house and purple finches as well as a few others checking for seed and bugs in the litter left from the summer growth. Instead of gathering all of those trimmings and limbs from early fall winds we try to create a few little piles of brush for cover and shelter during our cold and rainy months. What a great excuse cutting down our fall chores! There are a number of resources out there to help you learn more about sliding into fall with a little less work. Audubon, the Nature Conservancy, Habitat Network, the Cornell Lab and other organizations offer advice. A quick summary of their suggestions follows;

- Leave your leaves on the property
- Allow the gorgeous dried flower heads to stay standing in your garden
- Let the grass grow tall and seed
- Build a brush pile with fallen branches instead of removing them
- Forget the chemicals
- Leave snags on your property
- Delay garden clean-up until spring, after several 50°F (10°C) days, which allows overwintering pollinators to “wake-up” for spring and move on

Thanks for listening. If you're like me you might plan a few more birding days instead of cleaning up the garden. Or, if it is like today and really raining hard, getting a few inside chores done.

Padilla Bay Christmas Bird Count 2019

This year is the 120th for the Christmas Bird Count, sponsored by the National Audubon Society and the nation's longest-running community science bird project. Each year between December 14 and January 5, volunteers across the United States, Canada, the Caribbean, Latin America, and the Pacific Islands count bird species and individuals within almost 2,500 count areas. Each area is a 15-mile diameter circle. Skagit Audubon's role in this large effort is to organize and conduct the “Padilla Bay Christmas Bird Count,” so-named because the center of the count circle lies on the March Point peninsula next to Padilla Bay.

The 2019 Padilla Bay Christmas Bird Count is scheduled for Saturday, December 28th. For information about participating in this all-day survey birders should contact Tim Manns (conservation@skagitaudubon.org or 360.333.8985) or Denny Quirk (denny@skagitaudubon.org).

ABOUT SKAGIT AUDUBON – Skagit Audubon Society is a chapter of the National Audubon Society. Our mission is to conserve and restore natural ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife and their habitats for the benefit of humanity and the earth’s biological diversity. General membership meetings are held at the Padilla Bay Interpretive Center, 10441 Bayview Edison Rd., Mt. Vernon on the second Tuesday of each month, September through June. Social/7:00 pm and Program/7:30 pm. The board of directors meets at the same location the first Tuesday of each month, September through June, at 7:00 pm.

Skagit Audubon membership provides a local chapter affiliation and newsletter, *The Flyer*, for individuals who want all their funds to benefit their local chapter. *The Flyer* is produced monthly from September through June and full color issues are available at: www.skagitaudubon.org/newsletter. Unless otherwise noted, all images, drawings, clip art, etc. appearing in *The Flyer* are in the public domain. We reserve the right to edit.

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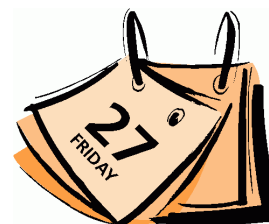
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MARK YOUR CALENDAR:

Oct. 1 – Skagit Audubon Board Meeting
Oct. 2 – Skagit Audubon Hike Ruby Arm
Oct. 8 – Skagit Audubon Program and General Meeting
Oct. 9 – Skagit Audubon Hike Morovitz Creek Trail
Oct. 16 – Skagit Audubon Hike The Lime Kiln Trail
Oct. 23 – Skagit Audubon Field Trip Stanwood and Port Susan Bay
Oct. 23 – Skagit Audubon Hike Baker Lake Trail
Oct. 26 – Skagit Audubon Field Trip South Fidalgo Island and Deception Pass
Oct. 30 – Skagit Audubon Hike North Chuckanut Mountain
Nov. 6 – Skagit Audubon Hike Little Cranberry Lake



OCTOBER HIKES by Joan Melcher

Safety comes first so hikes may be canceled or destinations changed due to weather conditions or other unforeseen circumstances. All hikes are on a Wednesday and for questions or additional information contact Joan Melcher at jdmelcher@comcast.net or

360.424.0407. Dogs are discouraged on Audubon-sponsored hikes and if present they must be on a leash at all times. NOTE: upon arrival at destination, if cancellation of the hike is determined at the discretion of the Audubon trip leader, any individual who elects to proceed is no longer considered to be a member of an Audubon-sponsored activity. Carpools are arranged at the discretion of the drivers. ***means that a Northwest Forest Pass or a Senior Pass (America the Beautiful National Parks & Federal Recreational Lands Pass) is required.**



OCT. 2 RUBY ARM Hike on the East Bank of Ross Lake Trail over a carpet and under a canopy of fall leaves kicking leaves to your heart's content. Hike to either Ruby Arm, Hidden Hand Pass, or part way up Little Jack Trail, 7 to 8 miles round trip. Meet at 7:30 a.m. on the east side of the Sedro-Woolley Food Pavilion parking lot. No parking permit is required. Two different return times; carpool accordingly. 2 pm for those who do shorter hikes; 3:30 pm for those who go longer distances.

OCT. 9 MOROVITZ CREEK TRAIL* This is a forest hike with streams and some mountain views on forest service road 1144 which has been converted to trail and is part of the route of the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail, the PNT. One can hike to the Mt Baker Hot Springs and/or down to Rainbow Creek. 7.1 miles if one does all the options, with approximately a 500 ft elevation gain. Meet at the Sedro-Woolley Food Pavilion parking lot by 7:30 am.

OCT. 16 THE LIME KILN TRAIL Hike 7 miles, RT, on this historical route into a lush and remote canyon carved by the Stillaguamish River near the town of Granite Falls. 625 ft elev gain. Meet at 7:30 am at the Mount Vernon Safeway parking lot. Snohomish county residents may drive directly to the trailhead. Check WA Trails Association web site for driving information or contact Joan Melcher above.

OCT. 23 BAKER LAKE TRAIL FROM THE SOUTH* Hike to Maple Grove and Anderson Point, 8 miles round trip, 620 ft el total el gain. Beautiful forest and views of Baker Lake. Views of Mt. Baker and Mt. Shuksan if the weather is clear. Meet at 8 am on the east side of the Sedro-Woolley Food Pavilion parking lot. Two return times to trail head: 1:30 pm or 2:30 pm; car pool accordingly.

OCT. 30 NORTH CHUCKANUT MOUNTAIN: Hike trails on the northwest side of Chuckanut Mountain. Two options: (1.) Raptor Ridge, 11.3 miles, about an 1800 ft total elev gain. (2.) Madrone Crest, 8.7 miles, about a 1600 ft total elev gain. Shorter hikes available for both options. Meet at 9 a.m. at the North Chuckanut Parking lot located on the east side of Chuckanut Drive between the Old Samish Highway and California Street. This is about milepost 18.5. You may leave when your car-load has returned.

NOV. 6 LITTLE CRANBERRY LAKE Do a hike around Little Cranberry Lake in the Anacortes Community Forest Lands. 6.0 miles, 670 ft. total el. gain. Meet at 9:00 a.m. at the trailhead located on "A" Ave between 37th and 41st Streets in Anacortes. You may leave when all in your vehicle return to the trailhead. Historically, all are back by 1 pm.

CONSERVATION by Tim Manns

Fall brings return of avian abundance to Skagit's bays and river deltas: so many ducks, snow geese, swans, hawks, falcons, bald eagles, great blue herons. This remnant of once much more widespread natural abundance did not just happen. Some once rare species are now common again thanks to protection, concerted effort, and investment. We're mindful too of species in decline. The marbled murrelet could be gone from Washington within a few decades. Wintering Western Grebes and Surf Scoters were once much more numerous.

And other birds, ones not associated with the bays and adjacent fields? If you have a hunch that bird populations in fields and forests have declined, there's now well-researched basis for that idea. On September 19th the journal *Science* published a large-scale study estimating avian loss in North America. Using multiple data sets to look at 529 bird species, the study found that since 1970 the number of North American birds has dropped by nearly 3 billion, almost a quarter of the total population. Declines have varied with type of habitat as well as species. Waterfowl and certain raptors are among the few increases, the very species so conspicuous in Skagit winters and that have received much conservation attention. Read more at <https://www.audubon.org/north-america-has-lost-more-1-4-birds-last-50-years-new-study-says>.

This news combined with National Audubon's 2014 report projecting serious declines in birds from habitat loss due to climate change (<https://climate.audubon.org/>) paints a grim picture. Together, these studies should command everyone's attention. The fate of birds is ours too. Their decline is yet another warning that change must happen. The biggest need is addressing human-caused climate change in a concerted way. Elected leaders and captains of industry must act, but we can all help reverse avian decline. Support protection of wildlife habitat by public agencies and land trusts, keep cats indoors, reduce bird/window collisions, don't use pesticides, plant native plants. For more ideas: <https://abcbirds.org/get-involved/bird-friendly-life/>. Participate in conservation advocacy too. Audubon focuses on issues relevant to its mission "to conserve and restore natural ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife and their habitats for the benefit of humanity and the earth's biological diversity." What kind of world do we want?

For information on national and Washington State Audubon conservation issues: <https://www.audubon.org/conservation> and <https://wa.audubon.org/conservation/advocacy>. For regional and local issues of special concern to Skagit Audubon: <https://skagitaudubon.org/conservation/notes>.

GRIZZLY BEAR PUBLIC COMMENT INFORMATION

For this re-opened comment period, the draft restoration plan and EIS are identical to the one on which many of you commented in 2017. Those comments remain valid. Nonetheless, if the ESA is to be upheld and the North Cascades are to ever again have their full complement of species, it's important to send individual comment letters briefly describing why grizzly restoration matters to you and supporting one of the plan's action alternatives, such as Alternative C. Remember that if this approach to supplementing the tiny existing population (if any) of grizzlies is implemented, several human generations will pass before a viable population again inhabits the wild North Cascades, an area the size of Massachusetts. Generations from now, sighting a grizzly in these mountains will still be a rare event indeed.

For background information and instructions on commenting, go to <https://www.northcascadesgrizzly.org/> (Friends of the North Cascades Grizzly Bear) and <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/document.cfm?parkID=327&projectID=44144&documentID=97321>. The deadline is October 24, 2019.

Skagit Audubon Field Notes by Pam Pritzl

This column reports submitted sightings. Any rare sightings should be accompanied by detailed written documentation and if possible a photograph. A second person to verify rare sightings is extremely helpful. Do not hesitate to call any observer to help document unusual sightings. Also do not hesitate to call if you need clarification on locations. **Please submit** your sightings to

birdsightings@skagitaudubon.org. For recent updates on bird sightings, check out **ABA Tweeters** and **Skagit County Ebird List** on the SAS website (Birding menu, Bird Sightings submenu).

WATERFOWL

Greater White-fronted Goose 25 flying over Samish Island on 9-3 (PP); 1 near Cockreham Island on 8-30 (GB)

Wood Duck 2 at SWAWS on 8-18 and 1 at SWAWS on 8-22 (NOH)

Cinnamon Teal 6 at Channel Drive on 8-18 and 6 at SWAWS on 8-22 (NOH)

Northern Shoveler 1 at SWAWS on 8-18, 5 at SWAWS on 8-22 and 2 at Channel Drive on 8-18 (NOH)

American Wigeon 1 at SWAHR on 8-24 (NOH)

Hooded Merganser 6 at SWAHR on 8-16, 4 at SWAWS on 8-18 and 5 at SWAHR on 8-24 (NOH)

GREBES

Pied-billed Grebe 1 at SWAWS on 8-22 (NOH)

Red-necked Grebe 1 in Burrows Bay, Anacortes on 9-10 (NOH)

Eared Grebe 2 at Samish Island Public Beach on 9-3 (GB)

PIGEONS and DOVES

Band-tailed Pigeon 10 at SWAWS on 9-8 (SAS)

SWIFTS

Black Swift 8 at Illabot Creek Alluvial Fan on 9-11 (GB)

HUMMINGBIRDS

Rufous Hummingbird 1 immature at Cap Sante, Anacortes yard on 9-3 (JH)

RAILS

Virginia Rail 1 at SWAWS on 8-22 (NOH)

PLOVERS

Black-bellied Plover 29 at SWAHR on 8-16 and 56 at SWAHR on 8-18 (NOH); 10 at SWAHR on 9-8 (SAS)

Pacific Golden-Plover 1 at SWAHR on 8-16 (NOH)

Semipalmated Plover 45 at SWAHR on 8-16, 30 at SWAHR on 8-18 and 12 at SWAHR on 8-24 (NOH)

SANDPIPERS and ALLIES

Hudsonian Godwit 2 at SWAHR on 8-10 (GB) **RARE**

Ruddy Turnstone 1 at the West 90, Samish Island on 8-7 (GB) **RARE**

Red Knot 18 at SWAHR on 8-31 (GB) **high count**; 3 at SWAHR on 9-8 (SAS)

Stilt Sandpiper 1 at Channel Drive on 8-15 (GB); 1 at SWAWS on 8-27 (PP)

Sanderling 1 on Alice Bay, Samish Island on 8-26 (GB)

Baird's Sandpiper 2 at the West 90, Samish Island on 8-7 (GB)

Least Sandpiper 12 at SWAWS on 8-18, 7 at Channel Drive on 8-18 and 2 at SWAWS on 8-22 (NOH); 2 at SWAHR on 9-8 (SAS)

Pectoral Sandpiper 8 at SWAWS on 9-8 (SAS)

Western Sandpiper 100 at SWAHR on 9-8 (SAS)

Short-billed Dowitcher 18 at SWAWS on 9-8 (SAS)

Wilson's Snipe 9 at SWAWS on 9-8 (SAS)

Spotted Sandpiper 1 at SWAHR on 8-24 (NOH); 1 at SWAHR on 9-8 (SAS)

Solitary Sandpiper 1 at Nichol's Bar on 8-5 (GB)

Lesser Yellowlegs 1 at SWAHR on 9-8 and 35 at SWAWS on 9-8 (SAS)

Willet 1 at SWAHR on 8-10 (GB) **RARE**

Greater Yellowlegs 2 at SWAHR and 5 at SWAWS on 9-8 (SAS)

Field sightings continued on page 8

Field sightings continued from page 7

Red-necked Phalarope 1 at SWAHR on 8-10 (GB)

JAEGERS

Parasitic Jaeger 2 at Samish Island Public Beach on 9-11 (GB)

GULLS and TERNS

Franklin's Gull 3 at SWAHR on 8-11 (GB); 1 at SWAHR on 8-18 (NOH)

Caspian Tern 30 observed from the Tommy Thompson Trail, Anacortes on 8-14 (MC); 40 at SWAHR on 9-8 (SAS)

PELICANS

American White Pelican 30 at Deer Lagoon, Whidbey Island and 14 at Crockett Lake, Whidbey Island on 8-11 (RWJ)

VULTURES

Turkey Vulture 1 at SWAWS on 8-18 (NOH)

HAWKS, EAGLES and ALLIES

Northern Harrier 1 at SWAHR on 8-16, 1 at SWAHR on 8-18 and 1 at SWAHR on 8-22 (NOH)

Sharp-shinned Hawk 1 at SWAWS on 8-22 (NOH)

Cooper's Hawk hanging around first half of August at east Fidalgo, Anacortes yard (RW)

OWLS

Great Horned Owl heard young owls begging at east Fidalgo yard on 8-16 (RW); 2 juveniles at La Conner yard on 8-31 (RWJ)

WOODPECKERS

Hairy Woodpecker 1 at Anacortes yard on 9-9 (TK)

Northern Flicker 1 "red-shafted" at Anacortes yard on 9-10 (TK)

FALCONS

Peregrine Falcon 2 at SWAHR on 8-18 and 1 at Channel Drive on 8-18 (NOH); 1 at SWAWS on 9-8 (SAS)

FLYCATCHERS

Olive-sided Flycatcher 1 at SWAWS on 8-22 (NOH)

Willow Flycatcher 1 at SWAWS on 8-18 and 2 at Channel Drive on 8-18 (NOH)

Black Phoebe 3 at SWAWS and 1 at SWAWS on 8-22 (NOH)

VIREOS

Warbling Vireo 1 at Cap Sante, Anacortes yard on 9-4 (JH)

CORVIDS

Clark's Nutcracker 2 at Easy Pass on 8-12 (GB)

SWALLOWS

Purple Martin several flying around east Fidalgo, Anacortes yard week of 8-18 (RW)

CHICKADEES

Mountain Chickadee 4 at Easy Pass on 8-12 (GB)

CREEPERS

Brown Creeper 2 at La Conner yard on 8-11 (RWJ)

DIPPERS

American Dipper 1 at Bagley Creek, Mt. Baker on 9-4 (YH)

KINGLETS

Golden-crowned Kinglet first of season at east Fidalgo, Anacortes home on 9-7 (RW)

FINCHES and ALLIES

Pine Siskin 12 at Anacortes yard on 9-9 (TK)

SPARROWS and ALLIES

Clay-colored Sparrow 1 near Cockreham Island on 9-6 (GB) **RARE**

Vesper Sparrow 1 at Illabot Creek Alluvial Fan on 9-2 (GB)

Fox Sparrow first of season on 9-4 at east Fidalgo, Anacortes yard on 9-4 (RW)

Golden-crowned Sparrow 1 at the West 90 on 9-3 (GB) **early**; first of season at east Fidalgo yard on 9-5 (RW) **early**

Field sightings continued on page 9

Field sightings continued from page 8

BLACKBIRDS and ORIOLES

Yellow-headed Blackbird 17 at SWAHR on 8-19 (GB) **high count**

WARBLERS

Orange-crowned Warbler 3 at east Fidalgo, Anacortes yard on 8-16 (RW)

MacGillivray's Warbler 1 at east Fidalgo, Anacortes yard on 8-16 (RW)

Common Yellowthroat 1 at SWAWS on 8-22 (NOH)

Yellow Warbler 1 at Channel Drive on 8-18 (NOH); 1 at east Fidalgo, Anacortes yard on 8-18 (RW); 2 at La Conner yard on 8-19 (RWJ); 1 at Cap Sante, Anacortes yard on 8-22 (JH)

BLACKPOLL WARBLER 1 at Burlington home on 8-25 (JKW) **RARE**
Yellow-rumped Warbler juvenile "Myrtle" at Cap Sante, Anacortes yard on 8-23 (JH)

Black-throated Gray Warbler 1 at east Fidalgo, Anacortes yard on 8-1 (RW); 1 at east

Stanwood yard on 9-10 (MS); 1 female at Cap Sante yard, Anacortes on 9-11 (JH)

Townsend's Warbler 1 male at Camano Island yard on 8-24 (PP); 1 at east Fidalgo, Anacortes yard on 8-27 (RW)

Wilson's Warbler 1 at east Fidalgo, Anacortes yard on 8-29 (RW); 1 at La Conner yard on 9-5 (RWJ)

MAMMALS

River Otter 3 observed from the Tommy Thompson Trail, Anacortes on 8-14 (MC)

(GB) Gary Bletsch; (MC) Morty Cohen; (JH) Joe Halton; (YH) Yvonne Houppermans; (RWJ) Rosi & Wes Jansen; (TK) Trevor Kyle; (NOH) Neil O'Hara; (PP) Pam Pritzl; (MS) Mary Sinker; (SAS) Skagit Audubon Society Field Trip; (SWAHR) Skagit Wildlife Area Hayton Reserve; (SWAWS) Skagit Wildlife Area Wylie Slough; (RW) Regan Weeks; (JKW) Jan & Keith Wiggers



WILLET, WILLET, WILLET – by Mary Sinker

A few very lucky birders, including my husband Jeff and me, were treated to a Willet sighting at Skagit Wildlife Area, Hayton Reserve, back in mid-August. Who is this guy and what was he doing here?

Willetts are large plain shorebirds, but as soon as they take flight their identity is unmistakable with striking black and white markings and even calling

their name in flight. Quite possibly, this bird had spent breeding/nesting season in the northwestern interior at a prairie marsh before migrating to the coast for the winter.

Willetts forage for insects, crustaceans, marine worms, crabs, small mollusks, small fish, aquatic insects and plant material by walking along the shore or in shallow water, probing in mud or water for their food. Their wide diet depends somewhat on their local environment and in favorable areas they are abundant, nesting in colonies, and spring mornings are filled with their ringing calls.

Isn't migration wonderful!

Under the Aspen Grove, by Thomas Bancroft

Rustling sounds filled the meadow while millions of small silvery flashes came from the copse. It was just a gentle breeze that morning but enough to make the leaves flutter. A pale green then green-silver would sparkle, and waves of these flickerings would transverse back and forth, like ripples moving across a small pond. No wonder these trees are called quaking aspens.

A loud commotion came from my left. Just 20 feet away, a 6-foot high post had a birdhouse. Six chattering Tree Swallows were doing acrobatics within a few feet of the box. A pair had a nest there, and perhaps these others were trying to usurp the space. The birds never touched, but they came within inches as each twisted and turned. Their long pointed wings and broad tails providing precise control. Finally, one bird settled onto the roof, chattering lightly, and the others dispersed. At that point, I suspected this was some kind of social interaction, a morning greeting.

My attention turned to the aspen grove, and the bird I had come to find. The “chebec, chebec, chebec, ...” drifted from deep in the trees. The Least Flycatcher was singing. This species is in the genus *Empidonax*, a group of small, drab birds, which look virtually identical and can be reliably separated only by their songs. This individual, less than six inches long, was probably sitting on a branch



Least Flycatcher, by Thomas Bancroft

four or five feet off the ground, scanning for flying insects, and giving its incessant territorial chant. The remarkable thing was that he was well outside his normal breeding range.

I first saw this species in Western Pennsylvania when I was in high school. It breeds north from the central Appalachians through Canada and west to the Rockies. A few breed in northeastern Washington, but this site at Conboy National Wildlife Refuge in south-central Washington is hundreds of miles out of its normal range.

I was curious to find this bird for I had a strange feeling of connection to it, almost like this little guy was a brother. Except for undergraduate school, I'd spent my first 60 years living in Eastern United States before moving west to Seattle. Since settling here, I've felt both out of place and yet extremely content. The flycatcher, also, didn't seem to care if it was far from its regular haunts. Several dozen birders had heard his song over the last week. He was apparently here for the breeding season.

My left hand clutched the parabolic microphone pointing toward the sound, while my right hand held my binoculars in the ready position. The digital recorder was running while I searched the understory for this elusive bird. No one was allowed anywhere beyond these trails, and if I didn't want human-made sounds in my soundtrack, I couldn't move. My best chance to see this individual was if it flew and landed on a visible branch.

Other birds were also singing on this early June morning. The elaborate warbles of a house wren came from the understory to my left, and a warbling vireo's slurry notes drifted through the quaking leaves above me. White-breasted Nuthatches, Red-breasted Sapsuckers, Western Bluebirds, and Western Wood-Pewees also made their presence known. Headsets covered my ears, giving me a stereo concert of this forest patch at the edge of the wet savanna that covered most of this Refuge.

Suddenly, I realized a second Least Flycatcher was calling off to my left, so I turned the parabolic reflector in that direction to see if the sound would become more distinct. Yes, it definitely was a second individual. Both sexes sing in this species. The first part of the female's "chebec" is slightly lower in pitch, but the second part is virtually identical. Males, though, are not evenly dispersed through suitable habitat but rather form clumps of small territories. It is like a classical lek system where the males all compete for females on a stage rather than being spread throughout the theater. My ears weren't discerning enough to decide if this was a pair or two separate males.

They have an exciting display, but I was there at the wrong time of day. For a short period after sunset, the male will climb up through the branches to the top of the canopy offering warbles, whits, and chebecs as he goes. He then performs a "flight song" in which he flies up from the treetops for 30 seconds, singing non-stop, and then tumbles back down, much the way a butterfly might flutter. Of course, ornithologists think it has something to do with mating, but we don't know the actual function of this flight song. In my imagination, I can only assume that the male goes high to become visible to a distant female who might be wandering through looking for a mate.

A flash of brown zipped behind an aspen trunk and then landed on a dead branch a few feet off the ground. The Least Flycatcher looked off to my right, gazing up and down into the small opening under the aspens. A second later, he was gone, but a surge of energy stayed with me. This bird was living life wherever he was.

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Saturday, Oct. 12th, from 10 AM to Noon**

**Meet at Washington Oakes, 1717 Rockefeller Avenue. After introductions, participants
will head out to view nearby North Everett rain gardens. Come dressed for the weather.
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