

Echo

February 2021  
Olympia, Washington



## Bird of the Winter Season 2021: GREAT HORNED OWL

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By Sharon L. Moore

*Bubo virginianus*  
Order: Strigiformes  
Family: Strigidae

Listen carefully these winter evenings and early mornings and you may hear a mated Great Horned Owl pair high up in conifer trees calling back and forth with a haunting, foghorn-like *whoo whodo whoo who*. Listen more carefully and you'll hear the female's calls at a softer, higher pitch than the male's. As early nesters in January and February, these owls will have established their presence at the nest they've chosen and are now defending their territory, warning predators to stay away. If the parents succeed in producing a brood this season, in five or six weeks you'll hear the fledglings shrieking for food as the parents settle in to their months-long, arduous hunting routines to raise those young owlets to adulthood. With luck, in the fall you'll hear the entire family hooting again as the now mature younger generation prepares to leave home to establish their own territories.

The Great Horned Owl is an iconic bird, the quintessential owl in legends and children's stories, symbolizing wisdom, patience and strength. It can be found in most of North America. Though in Western Washington it generally prefers the edges of second-growth coniferous forests, in the broader continental U.S. it may live in a wide variety of terrains, from smaller forests to wetlands, deserts, grasslands, even city parks. The male weighs from 3 to 3.5 pounds and the female outweighs him by up to one-third. With a body 22 inches long and a wingspan of 45 inches, this large owl species is a formidable, powerful, fearless hunter with a well-camouflaged body. The head is large, the eyes yellow, the face light brown with a white throat. The body is mottled grayish-brown with a finely barred lower breast and belly. The large ear tufts of 3 to 4 feathers, which are not the actual ears, are thought to be useful for camouflage, to help obscure the outline of the bird's head from potential prey.

These birds are skilled, aggressive, tenacious predators that will predate on other bird species, particularly American Crow young in their nests. Though owls have historically been thought to hunt strictly at night, there's now confirmation that Great Horned Owls actually hunt most often in the hours before sunrise and sunset. In the winter when food supplies are low, they may begin hunting in the evening and continue all night until early morning. Their highly sensitive hearing allows them to locate prey and their excellent vision helps them capture it. Assisting with their hunting accuracy is also their wide field of vision. As with other owl species, they can turn their heads 270 degrees in either direction – three-quarters of a full circle. How is this anatomically possible? The answer is that all owls carry twice as many vertebrae in their necks and twice the blood supply to their brains that we humans do. Hence, they have the energy and capability of repeated, extreme head movements over long periods of time.

Surveying the ground and greenery from high perches, the Great Horned Owls swoop down to grab prey in their talons. Their diet is so varied that it seems no relatively small species is safe from this highly efficient hunter. Scorpions, mice, snakes, lizards and frogs are highly prized, as are opossums, squirrels and rabbits. In our more northern latitude they may also take larger prey such as geese, ducks and smaller owls. Even the occasional skunk or porcupine may tempt them. During freezing winters, they store large prey, returning in warmer weather to defrost and eat the carrion. They may also walk furtively along the ground, stalking prey in the forest understory and even around shrubbery that borders buildings.

Courting begins in winter for these birds. Once the male entertains the female with display flights and feeds her who knows what delicacies, the pair bonds and may roost together near their chosen nest for several months before laying their eggs. They will remain monogamous, mating for life if possible. Generally Great Horned Owls commandeered nests already constructed by larger birds such as eagles, hawks or herons. The owls' primary requirement is that the site needs enough tree density or heavy brush to provide adequate cover for the nest. They may also nest in cliff-side cavities where they have good shelter from predators and inclement weather. The pair takes up residence after doing minimal nest preparation, usually by adding down feathers, leaves and tree bark. After the female lays a clutch of 2 to 5 eggs, she begins the incubation period of 30 to 37 days, generally incubating alone, with the male feeding her during this time. During this critical period her eggs and nestlings are in constant danger of predation by raptors, crows, raccoons and coyotes. Once the nestlings are born, they are completely helpless, requiring both parents to guard and feed them. At five weeks old the juveniles that have survived may leave the nest and roost nearby while both parents continue to feed them for several months. At seven weeks, the juveniles take short flights and at nine to ten weeks they can fly with ease.

During this nesting period, the male and female viciously defend their offspring, confronting intruders with hissing, screaming and bill snapping. If intruders fail to leave, the owls may spread their 45-inch wings and strike with their talons. BHAS member Bill Tweit, a highly experienced, expert birder, can verify the ferocity of these birds' defense postures. He describes a recent encounter he had with a Great Horned Owl pair when he and a partner inadvertently flushed the pair away from their nest in a road bank. "Watching them look down at us, hissing and bill snapping as they flew over our heads, was a great reminder of their power and also a reminder that we were glad we weren't their prey."

The survival prognosis for the Great Horned Owl population is not well established. They seem to adapt easily to habitat disturbances as long as good nest sites remain available. In recent decades, for example, in the Pacific Northwest, due to logging, they have expanded their ranges into open land and second growth forests. But, while Partners in Flight estimates the global breeding population to be 6 million with 45% of that in the United States, the species has actually experienced a steady decline in the U.S. and Canada in the last five decades. Numbers in the U.S. declined by 33% between 1966 and 2015. In Canada the decline was even steeper for that period, resulting in a total loss of 72%. Since these owls had been heavily hunted up to the mid-twentieth century, hunting of the species was finally banned at that time. However, illegal hunting continues to be a problem. Field biologists have also documented that northern populations of Great Horned Owls rise and fall in cycles with their prey population cycles. It's reasonable to assume, therefore, that with food sources dwindling due to the effects of climate change, this owl population may seriously decline as global temperatures rise. Along with climate change dangers, however, the most serious immediate threat to these and all owl species is the prevalence of poisoning by pesticides and other toxic substances in the flesh of their prey.

# Proposed WA Fish and Wildlife Acquisition of TransAlta Tract

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Black Hills Audubon supports the efforts of the Washington Dept. of Fish and Wildlife to acquire the 9600-acre TransAlta Centralia Mine Property in Lewis and Thurston Counties. BHAS testified in support at the Fish and Wildlife Commission Meeting on January 28. Because reclamation work is still in process, the property would be opened to the public in phases.

Bill Shelmerdine reports that he has conducted Breeding Bird Surveys (BBS) throughout the Trans Alta Property since at least 2005. He finds it to be a unique area locally, which is regularly used by numerous bird species, several of which are locally uncommon or even rare. The property itself has unique habitat features, many ponds and wetland complexes, and many opportunities for both riparian and upland habitat restoration/improvement.

## Armchair Birding: Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses By Robin Wall Kimmerer

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By Anne Kilgannon

Robin Wall Kimmerer was drawn to study botany because she was filled with the question, “Why is the world so beautiful?” She has spent decades pursuing answers to this puzzle and sharing her discoveries with her students and the lucky readers who stumble upon her books. Many of us\* have come to know and love her renowned explorations in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, but her first book *Gathering Moss* is less well known. I picked it up on a hunch in 2003 from the University of Oregon’s publication table at a history conference but it languished on my shelf until recently. Kimmerer believes that “plants come to us when they are needed. If we show them respect by using them and appreciating their gifts they will grow stronger.” I wasn’t ready then for her message but now being retired from the pursuits of that time and taking a new turn, opening my life up to nature studies and the transformations that has brought, I savored every story she tells on these pages. Like plants, books come to us when we are awake enough to let them change us.

At first, reading about moss and the study of moss was like confronting the blur of green carpet we see everywhere this rainy time of year for the first time and realizing that (of course) moss is not one thing but a thousand different species, each with special characteristics and habits. Kimmerer guides us down into the welter and says, “Look, look here at this tiny leaf, this tendril and curl.” She shows us how to grow eyes for microscopic differences, for the astounding variety of ways mosses have evolved to survive in very specific environments under conditions most plants would not be able to tolerate. Mosses have no root system or very complicated structures; they are totally open to the elements, soaking in life-giving rain and sunlight and waiting patiently when these elements are not available. But nothing is simple about how they do that; mosses are geniuses of strategies for survival, growth and reproduction. I was amazed to learn how subtle and extraordinary mosses are and how complex are their reciprocal relationships with their surroundings. They are an ancient species, probably one of the very first to colonize land, and have used the eons to spread over the earth and find niches of habitat everywhere where they can make a living and a contribution to the beauty we find in all living beings.

Kimmerer advises, “Learning to see mosses is more like listening than looking. A cursory glance will not do it.... Mosses are not elevator music; they are the intertwined threads of a Beethoven quartet.... Slowing down and coming close, we see patterns emerge and expand out of the tangled tapestry threads. The threads are simultaneously distinct from the whole, and part of the whole. “ Reading, I had to slow down too, and stop after each passage and ponder her meaning. Her work is a revelation. Her writing style is both exacting and clear as well as expressive of her sense of wonder and deep affection for the life she observes. We learn a lot about how to ask questions, how to turn and turn about, marveling and examining these incredible life forms and being patient while we search for understanding. Kimmerer reminds us to “think like a moss.” Why this form, why that strategy? Everything has a reason if we just keep trusting moss to know best how to survive and thrive. This is science from the inside out. That too is a revelation.

And for birders, we can adopt that way of thinking, of understanding and query. What would it mean to think like a bird, to place ourselves inside the very being of a bird and understand its ways and choices? It’s an exciting proposition! I will turn to this book again and again to remind me how to look deeply and with intention and love. Nature is all around us, even underfoot in the cracks in the sidewalk. That line of green is alive and flourishing, waiting to tell us its story. I’ll never look at moss in the same way again.

\* A special thank you to Paul Moody for recommending *Braiding Sweetgrass* a long time ago, so very right! Other recommendations are welcome. You can comment or send suggestions to me at [anneandgary@nullgmail.com](mailto:anneandgary@nullgmail.com) Please see “Save the Date” in this Echo for a book group proposal based on these reviews.

## Elephants in the Room

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By Hal Michael

The phrase “Elephant in the Room” is a metaphor for situations where there is an obvious problem that the people who are supposed to be making or influencing a decision are unwilling to recognize, discuss, or address. For those active in the conservation and management of natural resources there are a number of these “elephants” that I would like to put out for discussion.

Part of the problem, and I will get into this, is that people often confuse the “problem” with the “solution”. Because if a solution to a problem is unacceptable to someone, they won’t be willing to even discuss the problem because they don’t want to see a particular solution they oppose implemented. There are always many possible solutions depending on the desired outcome. I will try to keep these two threads separate but point out where this has occurred.

The first Elephant, and the one that drives all the others, is human population. Even though technological developments can, to a degree, affect the capacity for life, the Earth has a finite capacity for it. There is only so much fresh water, so much arable land, so much in non-renewable resources such as metals and petrochemicals, and so on. Note that I said, “capacity for life” and not “capacity for humans” as these are two different things. The capacity for humans, as with all other living resources, varies with the choices we make about how the earth will be shared.

Because I believe in sharing the earth with other life forms, I believe that we currently have too many people on earth. The vast African savannas and their herds are declining, the Great Apes are declining, the vast Bison herds in the Great Plains are gone, the California Grizzly is gone, many of our Atlantic and Pacific salmon runs are gone, we are observing significant declines in birds, insects, and amphibians, and so on. These animals lived in areas that are now used to support people living in mostly urban environments. In order to restore those resources and their ecosystems would we remove the people and infrastructure currently in place? If not, how do we intend to restore them?

The first problem, then, is actually defining how many people we want and where they are to be distributed. We may, for example, say that Lacey-Olympia-Tumwater (L-O-T) can remain within fixed boundaries, but the trade-off might be that other lowland, estuary, grassland, and prairies will be preserved in, or restored to, a natural state. But, in order to support L-O-T there needs to be provision for food, water, fiber, energy, minerals, and similar things so decisions will need to be made to provision the people because many of these materials are not produced within L-O-T. This same exercise needs to be done globally. We then have a number to shoot for that we all agree on. An integral part of the population setting is the need to clearly establish where more, or any, people can live.

At this point, the “how” gets discussed and decided with the knowledge that we have already agreed to the endpoint. Arguments over goals often become surrogate arguments over policy choices. Without the endpoint agreement, we will never actually preserve natural resources in their natural state because there will always be pressure for humans to move in, develop, and exploit materials. We can all remember areas where we lived or recreated as children that are now much more developed. As a fish manager, I often was asked “why can’t we have the seasons and limits we used to have?” Often, the questioner does not even recognize how the landscape has changed. Even setting population levels and defining boundaries leaves the problem unresolved in the long term because the earth, its geology, and climate are not static. We may decide, for example, that Seattle and Tacoma can exist within defined boundaries and the Cascadia Subduction Zone or Mt Rainier may forcefully express an alternative opinion.

The second Elephant that I see is that we are good at opposing proposals such as development of a mine, logging some woods, building a freight transfer site, developing a facility, building a dam, demanding removal of a dam, and so on. While opposition to such projects is laudable and is often “environmentally necessary” such opposition more about where the material such as lithium, silica, gold, or copper will come from. For example, we need metals to operate such mandatory items as computers, cell phones, and tablets in addition to automobiles, planes, houses, and consumer goods. The rare earths, lithium, silica, cobalt. Molybdenum all have to come from somewhere and to simply go NIMBY may save our neighborhood but moves the problem to somewhere else like Asia, South America, or Africa. I believe that we must, as part of opposition to a proposal, offer a more viable alternative. I emphasize “more viable”, but it at least needs to be as viable both economically and environmentally. We also need to make the costs of some of our choices, like salmon fueling electric vehicles through hydropower, more visible to ourselves. Otherwise, I fear that if all the conservation community ever expresses is opposition that we will be ignored because we are ignoring human needs.

The third elephant I see is that we tend not to form mutually beneficial alliances unless the ally checks all of our boxes. We ignore the old adage that “The enemy of my enemy is my friend”. The last few elections have shown rather clearly that we no longer value cooperation across our own society much less internationally. Many countries are quite willing to supply L-O-T with whatever we want, for a price. We do not need to agree with all of a group’s positions but should cooperate when we can. For example, Ducks Unlimited works very hard to preserve

and restore land to the benefit of huntable waterfowl. At the same time a myriad of other species utilize these marshes, wetlands, potholes, and such while at the same time offering hunting opportunities. Simple opposition to hunting, then, prevents working together to preserve and restore needed habitat.

I mention these alliances because the single item holding back much desired land acquisition, preservation, and restoration is money. Consumptive hunters and anglers in the US have sponsored legislation that taxes their equipment (Dingall/Johnson and Pittman/Roberts) and various State and Federal “Duck Stamps” to provide funding to manage, enhance, and restore consumable resources. The non-consumptive community has resisted efforts to tax their equipment. Whether or not you believe that conservation of natural resources is the responsibility of the entire population, we are currently not collecting, or maybe not disbursing, sufficient funds to meet education, infrastructure, public safety, mental health, healthcare, and associated needs. These needs are often seen as a higher priority, which leaves natural resources far down the list of funding priorities.

As I noted in the beginning, my goal is not to provide answers but to have an open discussion. In my view, if we do not deal with these, and probably other, elephants in the room we have already decided that the long term survival of naturally reproducing and evolving wild resources will not occur. We are simply managing the rate of extinction and should clearly admit this and move on.

To provide the perspective from an opposing view, here is a link to as response to similar pitch (Agenda 21). We have to understand their arguments and concerns and be able to offer viable alternatives to them.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BOERWeoqX68>

Lastly, as the recent Inauguration Speech by President Biden emphasized, we solve problems by working together. While difficult, it is what we must do.

## **A Salute to Bob Sundstrom**

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Bob Sundstrom is the lead writer and science advisor for NPR’s BirdNote. He has led birding tours all over the world with Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, and is the co-author of the *National Audubon Society Field Guide to the Pacific NW*. Bob is at home these days near Tenino, on hospice, after a recurrence of leukemia. Black Hills Audubon salutes the many ways in which Bob has advocated for birds and their conservation throughout his amazing life.

## **Attention Amazon Shoppers**

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Do you know that when you shop using Amazon Smile (instead of “regular, plain old” Amazon) a portion of the purchase price is automatically donated to a charity/nonprofit of your choice? And did you know that the Black Hills Audubon Society is one of the available choices? At no extra cost, you can contribute to a cause about which you care.

To sign up, just go to [smile.amazon.com](https://smile.amazon.com) and sign in with your [amazon.com](https://amazon.com) credential. Then choose a charitable organization. (We hope you select BHAS!). From then on, when you want

to shop on Amazon, go to the same web address ([smile.amazon.com](https://smile.amazon.com)) and shop as usual. If you are a prime member, you will receive the same free shipping as always.

Every little bit adds up to help us protect birds and their habitats and to educate the public about important issues such as climate change.

## **Newest DIY Trip Reports, February 2021**

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Our intrepid DIY field trip scouts continue to go forth and find the best places for you to explore in a Covid restricted manner. Here are the places that were featured in January:

Gary Wiles sent in a report on Black Lake Meadows, an urban refuge located a bit northwest of the Olympia South Puget Sound Community College campus. This is a perfect destination when you only have a few hours to bird.

Kyle Leader went a bit farther. Brady Loop is located just off of Olympic Highway 12 as you are approaching Montesano. This should be on your must-do list for winter. It hosts raptors and water birds galore and is perfect for mobility challenged birders.

Whittier Johnson snagged one of the prettiest areas of our DIY campaign. His report (due 1/30) will cover the Hood Canal and places like Potlatch State Park, Hunter Farms, and Union Marina. Pick a cooperative day of weather, pack a picnic lunch, and enjoy some of the prettiest country of south Puget Sound.

As always, the newest DIY report is featured on our website homepage ([Blackhills-audubon.org](https://blackhills-audubon.org)) along with a link to all the previous reports.

## **Board Meeting Review January 7, 2021**

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The Black Hills Audubon Society (BHAS) Board of Directors now has a full complement of 14 members.

A new Ad Hoc Committee was formed to explore Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) issues that pertain to our chapter. National Audubon is promoting these efforts and is offering appropriate resources.

Our Christmas Bird Counts went very well, considering Covid restrictions. The Lewis County effort finally tallied over 100 species – 104 to be exact. Thirty-eight volunteers logged almost 150 hours to find 26,000 birds. The Olympia count found 121 species using 102 participants volunteering 350 hours.

The Conservation Committee will submit a letter opposing the construction of a road through LBA Woods in Olympia. Efforts with the county council to limit the total land available for mineral extraction were unsuccessful. The Committee will closely monitor the Skookumchuck Wind Energy Project reports on bird kills plus are liaising with the Thurston Climate Action Team on implementing the Thurston Climate Mitigation Plan through city and county councils.

In conjunction with the Audubon WA Puget Sound Conservation Blueprint, the Conservation Committee met with the Departments of Natural Resources, Fish and Wildlife, and Transportation to discuss storm drainage through the Kennedy Creek Estuary. Storm current damages marsh habitat which then adversely affects wildlife. Two solutions were discussed.

Leadership volunteer roles being sought at present are: Field Trip Coordinator, Education Chair, and Communication Chair.

## **Volunteer Opportunities, February 2021**

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All chapter work is done by volunteers for whom we are very grateful. Due to the Covid-19 outbreak, our volunteer opportunities will be limited for some time. The following are opportunities that can be done without being exposed to others.

**FIELD TRIP COORDINATOR:** The time is coming when we can once again gather in groups for Audubon field trips! When that does happen, BHAS needs a coordinator for them – probably the most fun committee that we have. The previous coordinator is ready and willing to train her successor to plan and promote trips as well as recruit and train guides.

Kathleen Snyder ksnyder75@nullgmail.com

**COMMUNICATIONS CHAIR:** The committee that works on our digital connection to members and friends needs a new leader. This includes the monthly Echo (we currently have an editor as well as a number of excellent writers), our Facebook page (we have a wonderful administrator), our website (we have a paid consultant as well as a volunteer manager), and a Meet-up group (which does need attention). If you would like to step into a well-run team and get to know our organization, this would be perfect.

Kathleen Snyder ksnyder75@nullgmail.com

**OUTREACH COORDINATOR:** BHAS is not doing much outreach at the moment but the light is starting to shine at the end of the tunnel. Do you like meeting new people, answering questions, and promoting conservation issues? We need someone to research opportunities for outreach and recruit a cadre of volunteers to man our BHAS table at events. We have the equipment and handouts ready; we need an organizer!

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