

Echo

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Olympia, Washington



The Return of the Spotted-Owl Wars?

By Susan Jane Brown

Spanish philosopher George Santayana remarked, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Unfortunately, we tend to have short memories about difficult times in our history that divide our communities.

During “the timber wars,” also known as “the spotted-owl wars,” the period from roughly the late 1980s to the mid-2000s, loggers and environmentalists first fought over the listing of the diminutive northern spotted owl under the Endangered Species Act, and then over the management of the owl’s ancient forest habitat on public lands. Congress even suspended the application of environmental laws to timber harvest in the Northwest, forcing environmentalists to retreat to the forests we love, to occupy the canopies of trees older than our nation to prevent their felling to the ax.

But these measures could not forestall the inevitable court-ordered injunctions that followed what Washington District Court Judge William Dwyer called “a deliberate and systematic refusal ... by higher authorities in the executive branch of government ... to comply with the laws protecting wildlife.”

In 1994, President Bill Clinton brokered an uneasy truce by directing federal land and wildlife managers to work together on what would become the Northwest Forest Plan. This compromise left spotted-owl war combatants grumbling about broken promises and missed opportunities.

But since then, the spotted-owl wars have cooled. Many stakeholders have laid down their weapons of war and have chosen instead to sit around a table and collaborate on public forest management. These discussions have increased the pace, scale and quality of forest restoration in our region, resulting in not only improved forest health but also community socioeconomic resilience. Although much work remains, these efforts have reduced wildfire risk, improved wildlife habitat and increased water quality throughout the Pacific Northwest.

But now all that is likely to change.

In an overtly political decision, the Department of Interior and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on Jan. 13 stripped protections for the northern spotted owl from 3.4 million acres of federal forestlands. Career agency biologists have for years warned that the spotted owl — despite herculean efforts — continues to slide toward extinction. Fewer and fewer spotted owls are reproducing at sufficient rates to sustain the species, which is functionally extinct in the northern part of its range in Canada. The owl is also threatened by the legacy effects of past timber harvest, wildfire and its fierce competitor, the barred owl. Just weeks ago, the Fish and Wildlife Service determined that the spotted owl should be given *more* protection by uplisting it from threatened to endangered.

Eliminating 42% of spotted owl critical habitat results from a settlement between the timber industry and the Trump administration. In 2012, the industry challenged the Fish and Wildlife Service's designation of roughly 9 million acres of critical habitat. That argument found a sympathetic ear in this lame-duck administration, which worked quickly in its final days to deliver yet another sweetheart settlement deal to a favored political ally.

We've been here before. The timber industry fought tooth and nail against listing the spotted owl in 1990, fought each and every critical habitat designation, unlawfully influenced the owl's recovery plan in the mid-2000s, and inked another sweetheart settlement agreement with the second Bush administration to undermine Northwest Forest Plan protections. Each time, the courts were called in to direct federal forest management, and each time, the uncertainty created by these wild, political swings caused chaos in rural, timber-dependent communities and distracted from the real need for forest restoration.

So here we are again. Political actors are catering to the timber industry and its shortsighted focus on circumventing the best available science and environmental laws at the expense of the Pacific Northwest's iconic northern spotted owl. We absolutely can, and do, have a sustainable timber industry *and* protections for wildlife where successful collaborative efforts have made that possible.

But reigniting the Spotted Owl Wars by callously eliminating habitat essential to preventing the owl's extinction will make that good work next to impossible. This decision will upset the careful balance Northwesterners have struck between forest management and wildlife protection, forcing advocates, once again, to return to the courtroom for battle.

As American philosopher Yogi Berra said, "It's like déjà vu all over again."

Susan Jane Brown is an attorney and wildlands program director at the Western Environmental Law Center. She is a member of several forest management collaboratives and has worked on northern spotted owl conservation for more than two decades. She has graciously allowed us to reprint her *Seattle Times* op-ed.

Armchair Birding: Considering Fish

By Anne Kilgannon

A friend was exclaiming on the wonders of a publication she had been studying and asked if I would I like to see the three-volume set of *Fishes of the Salish Sea* before she returned her inter-library loan? The title brought back a vivid moment at a long-ago in-person program meeting of Black Hills, when Elizabeth Roderick took my arm and said, “You really must see and review this new set of books!” I had nodded then but had no idea what was in store for me. But the title stuck with me and now here the books were, about to fall into my lap, three giant books of exquisite design, organization and erudition. Serendipity said yes!

I truly had no idea of what an eye-opening treasure trove had come my way until I began to turn the over-sized pages and look into the eyes of one creature after another. Really, fish are nothing short of astonishing in their variety of body shapes, colors, structures, adaptations and ways of living. They easily rival birds in their myriad imaginative forms in all ways except for one important one: it would be exceedingly difficult to observe these fish in their habitat as we do birds, except perhaps in the most expansive fish market ever found. This is a world few of us have any notion exists “just out there” in Puget Sound and the connected waters of the Straights of Georgia and Juan De Fuca. This publication meets that need, superbly.

Previously, there existed no other scholarly guides for aspiring students and curious lay persons of ichthyo-fauna so comprehensive and up to date; older textbooks employed taxonomies that were now considered problematic and had not kept pace with marine research and discoveries. University of Washington marine biologists Theodore Wells Pietsch and James Wilder Orr recount their frustrations trying to teach and inspire students—as well as resource managers, ecologists, anglers and divers, anyone interested in the underwater world all around us—about the marvels of adaptation and diversity of life existing there. They met and schemed and hoped to remedy this lack but it wasn’t until artist Joseph Tomelleri joined their team that the project went from wish to reality. No photographs could have captured the life force so graphically. Indeed, the illustrations make this book the treasure it is.

There is one exquisite image for every fish of the two hundred and sixty species to be found in our local waters. Each one is anatomically correct right down to the number of scales found on each fish body. The colors, in splotches, stripes, shimmers, and shades are both true to life and therefore all the more incredible to gaze upon. Dr. Seus himself could not have been more inventive: from boneless, elongated and finless fish well-coated with slime, to goggle-eyed squashed-shaped flounders, to whip-thin quill fish, to the pickleback fish called a decorated warbonnet, and finally to the more familiar salmon, sharks and codfish. Some have wicked jutting jaws well equipped with razor edged teeth,

while some have no teeth at all but get their meals through sucking funnels they attach to their prey. They are a study in evolution and adaptation, in the wild assortment of ways to live, reproduce and inhabit the watery world from beach shallows to hidden depths, fresh to brackish to salty seas.

The illustrations were created in a complex process using the best models that the team could procure. The story of how they researched and searched for the best available specimens is as captivating as their achievement is legendary. Existing specimen collections were incomplete and often poorly cared for, the neglect mirroring academic underfunding and vagaries of departmental fashions and focus. Remedying that dereliction was a challenge but critical for the work. Creating a complete inventory of fish life was foundational for the understanding of biodiversity, range, extinctions, impacts of climate change, health of the ecosystem, and other concerns. What the authors achieved lays down a line of reference, a snapshot from which to measure change and gauge causes and effects and how the myriad species adapt—or not—to conditions. For the reader, it is a powerful experience to gaze at each fish and realize that each plays a role, has a place, an evolutionary history, and hopefully a future in our local waters.

The publication is spread over three volumes: the first being a general introduction to the field: its concerns, its history as a scientific discipline and its pioneers. Pietsch and Orr graciously acknowledge the shoulders they stand upon by including brief biographies of the scientists who preceded them, whose collections survived in the dusty jars of preserved species stacked in storerooms and closets. They provide a quick background on the glacial and geological formation of the seabed and adjoining waters, their different zones of salinity, depth, and other characteristics, linked with charts of habitat location and distribution of species.

After setting the stage, the authors and illustrator devote the next two volumes describing each fish. Each illustration is coded with pictorial keys that identify the species characteristics, variations by sex and developmental stages, seasonal migrations and usual habitats. There is a helpful glossary of terms that make the taxonomy discussion intelligible to non-experts, broadening the reach of this incredible work. The books conclude with an extensive reference section and a well designed index. The achievement is comprehensive and impressive, a milestone in the moving target of capturing fish life in the throes of continuous evolution and response to climate change and other pressures.

Did I have a favorite fish? Impossible to choose, but I was very taken with sculpins and rockfish for their paintbox of colors and markings—astonishingly beautiful. What was made abundantly clear as I studied the pages of this wondrous set of books was the sheer variety to be found, the hundreds of ways to be a fish in our local waters.

Two Opportunities for Community Science

Join Puget Sound Bird Observatory for the 2021 season of the
Regional **Wetland Secretive Bird Monitoring** Project

We need your help! Whether you have a few hours to offer or would like to take a deep dive into surveying wetland birds across the region, Puget Sound Bird Observatory (PSBO) can use you. We will match your availability with our need for monitors to survey for American Bittern, Sora, Virginia Rail and Green Heron within the Puget Sound area. There will be approximately 200 wetlands that need surveying this season; each wetland has between 1 and 5 survey points with most sites having 3 points. Each point takes roughly 20 minutes to fully survey. The survey window this year is from March 29, 2021 to June 13, 2021 with lots of opportunity to choose dates and locations that meet your availability and willingness to travel. Additional information can be found on the website: www.pugetsoundbirds.org

COVID-19 safety protocols have been developed, including delivering full training manuals and remote tutorials for all community science participants.

We highly value the time and talent of our community science participants and will provide thorough training so that all levels of birders can participate. Helping with this unique bird survey effort with PSBO is a great way to learn more about the birds and other wildlife in your local area. Training will include GPS navigation, broadcast surveying, distance sampling and habitat identification.

For additional information about the project or to volunteer, please call (425) 876-1055

Newest DIY Trip Reports

What do Hawk's Prairie, Theler Wetlands and the Toledo area have in common? All three were featured in our Do-It Yourself (DIY) field trips during the month of February. Jen DeSelle, Bonnie Wood and Anders Price scouted out these three great winter birding destinations and reported back so you could check them out.

If you have a hankering for warblers, you can find both Townsend's and Yellow-rumped at the LOTT Hawk's Prairie settling ponds. If a lovely walk over boardwalks and through various habitats with birds all round will chase away the last of the winter doldrums for you, then Theler Wetlands near Belfair has your name all over it. The Toledo area in Lewis County will probably be new territory for most of our members; what fun to have a new adventure while following a route designed just for birders (to be posted Feb 28).

Thank you to all of our dedicated scouts.

Olympia 2020 Christmas Bird Count

By Bill Shelmerdine

Total number of species was 123 seen on count day, plus 3 more (Long-tailed Duck; Northern Shrike; and White-breasted Nuthatch) seen count week. The total number of birds seen on count day was 58,103. The species count of 123 is somewhat lower than the 30-year average of 126.5 from 1990 to 2020. I don't know how the total of 58,103 stacks up but it seems toward the high end to me. The total number of participants or observers was 99, a number worthy of note. Perhaps not surprisingly in this COVID year, it included the highest number of feeder watchers that I am aware of for this count.

Most remarkable is the number of species that recorded high counts this year. 22 species had the highest species totals for the Olympia Count this year. They included Northern Shoveler, Green-winged Teal, Red-breasted Merganser, Coopers Hawk, Barred Owl, Anna's Hummingbird (268!), Downy Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Steller's Jay, California Scrub Jay, Common Raven, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Bewick's Wren, Varied Thrush, Pine Siskin (9608!), Lesser Goldfinch (29), Dark-eyed Junco, Golden-Crowned Sparrow, Spotted Towhee, and Townsend's Warbler.

Perhaps Anna's Hummingbird, California Scrub Jay, and Common Raven are not much of a surprise as they reflect a continuing trend. Barred Owl and Lesser Goldfinch also seem to be on a similar, though perhaps less dramatic, trajectory. Other species numbers may be related to timing and weather patterns. Jon Anderson pointed out "Nice weather on count day in between a pair of Chinook storms". Pine Siskin numbers seemed to be through the roof based on reports throughout the PNW.

Some of the more notable (perhaps) misses included Greater White-fronted Goose, Common Murre, Western Gull, Northern Shrike, American Dipper, and Cedar Waxwing. The absence of boat-based observers surely affected some numbers and species, most notably Common Murre and the almost-missed Rhinoceros Auklet (one only!). In lieu of boats, two teams of shore-based "sea watchers" did an admirable job finding many of the inland marine species. The absence of dipper this year was likely related to the construction closure in the Tumwater Falls area, the traditional spot within the count area.

One species was added to the count this year. A most unexpected and amazing Rock Wren was found by Matt Curtis and Joe Dlugo on Chris Warlow's team. Thanks to Chris for getting the word out, this bird was enjoyed by many during its several week stay. Other honorable mentions included Common Yellowthroat, Black Phoebe, Lesser Goldfinch, and Brown-headed Cowbird. The Phoebe and

Goldfinch have been seen in each of the last few years and will perhaps become part of the list of regulars.

It was a successful count, despite a number of challenges related to COVID. Thanks for everyone's participation and enthusiasm and in particular for conducting the count safely and in accord with the state's COVID protocols. Here's to another great year and I hope we can all make it again next year!

2020 LEWIS COUNTY CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

By Dalton Spencer

I want to thank everyone who participated this year so much for helping out! I would be absolutely worthless without all of the kindness and commitment of others that contribute to this effort. Your skills and dedication have directly related to the great numbers of this count. Once again, thank you all so much!

The unspoken spoken goal of the Lewis County CBC has been 100 species and on December 18th, 2020 we recorded 104 species, breaking the previous record by 6 species! To accompany those 104 species, we also had 3 more birds recorded during the count week – Iceland "Thayer's" Gull, Barred Owl, and Western Bluebird.

Due to COVID-19, we had to conduct the count differently than in a normal year. This allowed us to have greater coverage of the circle because groups were not allowed. Instead, singles or pairs covered smaller areas. This allowed birders to cover the areas more thoroughly and miss fewer birds. The weather on the day of the count was also significantly better than in 2019. It was a fairly warm day with high cloud cover and wind mainly in the late afternoon. The conditions could not have been better for a December day of birding in southwest Washington.

2020 gave us two new birds for the count: White-breasted Nuthatch and Ring-necked Pheasant (previously only seen on count week). From what I can see, this is the first time in at least 5 years that a White-breasted Nuthatch has been seen on a CBC north of Cowlitz County. The single bird was seen by Rachel Hudson just a few blocks away from downtown Chehalis in a residential neighborhood. There are many oak trees remaining in the area and it has long been wondered if the species once occurred here and if it would ever occur again. This year we found out that it could happen. Truly an amazing bird and an amazing find for the count.

Not only was 2020 an amazing species year but we also recorded 26,289 individuals, besting the previous record by 6,202!

Due to this being a new count, I know some of the following numbers may be slightly exaggerated. To help keep these numbers as normalized as possible, this summary only includes the species that had been seen on at least 3 of the 4 counts thus far. We had 59 species record a high count, 3 species record a low count, 6 tied their previous high count, and 2 tied their previous low counts. This means that only 33 species were within the normal range of values or recorded less than 3 times thus far on the count.

The three low counts were Wood Duck (2), Double-crested Cormorant (35), and American Pipit (2).

The five most common species on the count this year were: Pine Siskin (3087), European Starling (2587), Cackling Goose (1653), Northern Pintail (1522), Green-winged Teal (1316).

We had 15 species recorded in all 9 sections which goes to show how varied the habitats across the circle are. Some groups spent their days in mainly agricultural lands while others were mainly in heavily forested areas. The Lewis County CBC circle has an immense amount of variety of habitats.

Of species that have occurred in 3 or more counts, Pine Siskin had the greatest increase over its original high count with an increase of 759.89%. The previous high count for the species was 359 individuals in 2019 and this year we had a whopping 3087! This was on par for most of the CBCs in western Washington – most having seen a massive influx of Pine Siskins. Coming in second was Lesser Scaup with an increase of 550% over its previous high count. This was an increase from 12 to 78 individuals.

These numbers were gathered by 26 field participants and 10 feeder watchers. I am so glad that this CBC, with your help, was not another casualty of 2020.

Board Meeting Review February 4, 2021

The Board approved the recommendation from the Ways & Means Committee to move a portion of our reserve funds from a bank savings account into our ESG (Environment, Social, Governance) mutual fund to increase returns.

The new Corresponding Secretary has offered to research on-line membership database companies. Currently our donation and membership information is compiled on an Excel spreadsheet.

The Avian Science Committee has approached the WA Dept of Natural Resources about installing bluebird nest boxes at Mima Mounds Natural Area Preserve. The Department is willing to explore this project with us and has also asked for help with putting up one or more replacement Barn Owl nest boxes where an old barn on the Mima property is being torn down.

Our compiler for the Lewis County Christmas Bird Count is interested in conducting a spring bird survey in the same CBC circle, using similar protocols. The Board was supportive.

The Ad Hoc Committee on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion met for the first time and outlined how they will proceed. This will include monthly meetings.

The Puget Sound Blueprint restoration pilot projects for Eld/Totten Inlets and Mud Bay estuary are active. Both WA State Audubon and National Audubon are involved and a state coordinator for the pilot projects will be hired this year. Money to fund this position will come from National Audubon following a settlement involving the sale of tainted birdseed.

Ongoing projects include the email hotline for birding questions, a review of the BHAS website, a Beginning Birder class in March, and a possible BHAS annual picnic in the middle of September.