

# THE CALLIOPE

EAST CASCADES AUDUBON SOCIETY  
QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

Winter 2024



## President's Message

*By Duke Tufty*

Happy New Year fellow birders and ECAS members! I'm sitting down to write this on the winter solstice. The shorter days and darkness are a natural time of introspection that prompts me to reflect on the preceding year and set my goals for the one to come. With the promise of spring migration on the horizon, looking forward to the new year and what it may bring can be a delightful way to enjoy winter evenings.

I'd like to take this opportunity to tell you about my 2024 goals for ECAS. Before I do so, I want you to know that I am excited to serve as the president of ECAS this year. I'd like to thank our outgoing president, Mary Shivell, for her service and for helping to guide ECAS through the pandemic's challenges. I also would like to thank our board, volunteers, and members for all of their hard work, energy, and enthusiasm in making 2023 a great year. I look forward to working with all of you in 2024.

My first 2024 goal for ECAS is to provide more opportunities for members to come together. The pandemic took a terrible toll on our ability to gather for learning, fellowship and shared adventures. Zoom and social media helped us bridge that gap. Moving forward, we plan to continue offering Birders' Nights both in person and via Zoom. You'll also still be able to share your photos and stories on the ECAS Facebook page. But while those tools still have a part to play in our lives, they are not a replacement for real human contact.

In order to learn more about how ECAS can best offer our members rewarding in-person opportunities, we sent out a survey in December. Thank you to everyone who participated. We are now reviewing the results and look forward to strengthening our programming and the Central Oregon birding community with your input.

My second goal for ECAS in 2024 and beyond, is to help you celebrate your birding achievements. With all of the negativity and divisiveness that seems pervasive at times, I think it is essential to recognize the many great things going on in our world – big or small – and to actively pursue ways to celebrate them. To that end, we will begin featuring a "Celebrations" section in *The Calliope*. The act of celebrating our successes can be a powerful tool to motivate ourselves and inspire others, as well as a way to build our birding community.

Celebrations take many forms, but they are often the result of achieving a goal. Many birders – including myself – set goals each year. I love setting annual birding goals and want to share with you several ideas that might inspire you to set some birding goals of your own, or to add some new goals to your existing list. Whether you're entirely new to birding or have been birding for decades, goals can help to focus our energy and to see the world with fresh eyes. Some of you will enjoy setting goals in the spirit of friendly competition. Others, like me, will prefer to set personal goals in which we challenge only ourselves. In either case, I hope that we can all bring the spirit of camaraderie and a shared love of birds to the mix, enabling us to encourage and support one another.

When thinking about birding goals, here are some of the categories that I consider:

**Listing.** Listing is probably the most common type of birding goal. While “Big Years” garner attention and can certainly be inspiring, not every year lends itself to such an ambitious project. I enjoy setting smaller, specific goals that I can tailor to my circumstances. For example, I might set a goal to see “x” number of birds in a given year, rather than as many birds as possible. For several years now, I have set listing goals for certain far-flung Oregon counties as a way of both seeing birds and more of our beautiful state. When I have the opportunity to travel, I set goals for other states or ABA areas along the way. Other fun, approachable listing goals can be for your yard, your local patch, or an orphan patch, which is what I call a local birding spot that is underbirded. It is surprisingly rewarding to visit an orphan patch at least once a month for a year, to record its visitors, and to see its bar chart fill out on eBird.

**New Birding Experiences.** Perhaps 2024 will offer you the chance to stretch your wings and broaden your birding horizons. Go on your first Christmas Bird Count, or try a new one. If you have sea legs, consider trying a pelagic birding tour. Or, if you are an experienced pelagic birder, try a pelagic departing from a different port. If you'd prefer to fly or drive to your destination, consider attending a birding festival. Festivals are a great way to meet fellow birders, enjoy the more social side of birding, and explore a new place with the help of experienced local guides. There are a number of festivals in the Pacific Northwest and beyond, including ECAS's very own Dean Hale Woodpecker Festival. Of course, you need not do a tour or go to a festival. While birding with others can be rewarding, there's also a quiet joy in setting out alone to enjoy the sound of the birds in peaceful solitude.

**Learning.** One of the amazing things about birds and the natural world is that there is always more to learn, and one need not enroll in a formal course to satisfy a craving for knowledge. Consider setting a goal to read a set number of bird-related books this year. Or, commit to reading each issue of a monthly bird publication for all of 2024. Try listening to a birding podcast, or add a new podcast to your listening schedule. The American Birding Association podcast is a great place to start. I also particularly enjoy the Life List podcast. If you're interested in more structured learning, check out some of the amazing online courses offered by The Cornell Lab's Bird Academy, which include everything from bird identification to nature journaling. Finally, there is always something new to learn at ECAS's Birders' Nights, which feature talented and inspiring presenters from Oregon and beyond.

**Conservation and Giving Back.** As you are likely aware, birds continue to face significant challenges, including habitat loss, climate change, invasive species, and window strikes, among other issues. You can help. Consider setting an hourly volunteer goal for yourself, or try volunteering for a new organization. ECAS is entirely volunteer-driven. Central Oregon is also home to a number of great conservation organizations, such as Deschutes Land Trust, Oregon Natural Desert Association, the High Desert Museum, the Klamath Bird Observatory, the

Friends of Malheur, and the Sunriver Nature Center (just to name a few). Volunteer opportunities abound across these organizations: planting native species, conducting bird surveys, removing invasive weeds, stuffing envelopes, leading hikes – there are so many ways to help. Don't hesitate to call or email us if you'd like to chat about volunteer opportunities.

While 2024 will likely bring its own challenges, it also will present us with the opportunity to focus on what brings us joy and fulfillment, and to share that joy with those around us. If you set goals for 2024 and accomplish them, please let us know so that we can celebrate with you in *The Calliope's* Celebrations section. Writing your goals down and sharing them with someone in your life increases the chance that you will follow through on them. Whether you see your first one hundred species, finally glimpse the one species that has eluded you for twenty years, or you manage to see fifty species in every Oregon county, we want to celebrate with you. We look forward to learning about, and being inspired by, the goals you've set and achieved. Please take a look at the Celebrations section in this newsletter for more details and suggestions.

Since moving to Bend several years ago, I continue to be amazed by the many talented birders that call Central Oregon home. I am deeply moved by your enthusiasm for seeing birds and exploring the natural world, for sharing those experiences with others, and for helping conserve the habitat upon which birds and nature depend. And I'm sure that I'm only seeing a little piece of what makes the birding community in Central Oregon so strong and resilient. It is an honor to be a part of this community. I look forward to serving as ECAS president and I hope to see you out birding this year!

## **Celebrations–Your Milestones, Achievements and Birding Bliss**

*By Duke Tufty*

Inspired in part by the ABA's "Celebrations" section of *Birding Magazine*, *The Calliope* will now include a section where we can celebrate your birding milestones, achievements and bliss, big or small.

We always enjoy hearing about other people's stories and accomplishments, and want to hear more from Central Oregon's fantastic birding community. Examples include milestones and achievements in Central Oregon, the Pacific Northwest, or anywhere in the world where there are birds. Did you see 100 birds in a county, 200 birds in a state, or 500 birds in the ABA area? Did you complete a personal Big Year in a particular county, state, or your own yard or patch? Or perhaps you had a moving or funny experience while out birding? Or an anecdote about a meaningful volunteer experience? Did you finally see a particular bird that's been eluding you for years? These are just a few examples of the types of milestones and experiences we'd like to hear about. If it's birding-related and you'd like to celebrate it, we want to help.

Submissions should be 50 - 150 words and written in the third person. You can include a photo in your submission. Please send them to [ecaudubon@gmail.com](mailto:ecaudubon@gmail.com) with the subject line "Celebrations." And thank you!

## Check It Out!

Matt Cahill's excellent guide to birding Wickiup Reservoir - on the ECAS website - <https://www.ecaudubon.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/A-Quick-Guide-to-Wickiup-Reservoir-Birding-2023.pdf>

Blogs about local birding, listed on the ECAS website, at <https://www.ecaudubon.org/birder-resources/birding-blogs/>

Free YouTube informative and entertaining videos on bird-watching in Oregon at [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=birding+in+oregon](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=birding+in+oregon)  
There's even a bird-watching video for your (indoor) cat!

Winter Raptor Survey results [https://wrs.hmana.org/public\\_html/index.php](https://wrs.hmana.org/public_html/index.php)

Olympic Birdfest in Sequim, Washington, in April 2024. **Registration begins January 1st.** <https://olympicbirdfest.org/>

## First Quarter 2024 Upcoming Events

**Birders' Night** FRIDAY January 19 at 7pm Ned Bohrman from the Great Basin Bird Observatory will present on Pinyon Jay Conservation.

**Wednesday Birders** continues Wednesday mornings each week. Check COBOL for updates. <https://groups.io/g/COBOL/messages>

**Watch the monthly *Chatter* in February and March for info on these and other local activities:**

**Crooked River Wetlands First Saturday of the Month bird walks** resume March 2, 2024 weather permitting. Info at <https://www.cityofprineville.com/wetlands/page/events>

**Birding By Ear**, Sawyer Park in Bend, Tuesday mornings starting in March or April.

**Golden Eagle Cam in Whychus Canyon** <https://www.goldeneaglecam.org/home/live-camera>

## Important News from the ECAS Membership Committee

*By Jan Clark, Bonnie Thompson and Gordon Wetzel*

You will be able to join or renew your ECAS membership using either your credit card or debit card but PayPal will no longer be an option on MemberPlanet. And, as always, you will also be able to join or renew your membership by regular USPS. For further information, see our website at <https://www.ecaudubon.org/become-a-member/> . If you have any questions, email us at: [ecasmp@ecaudubon.org](mailto:ecasmp@ecaudubon.org).

# Klamath's Winter Wings Festival 2024 Canceled

(reprinted from their Facebook page)



Just want all to know that the Winter Wings Festival is taking 2024 off. The Klamath Basin Audubon Society (KBAS) board and WWF coordinators have decided to use the remainder of 2023 and the 2024 calendar year to restock its volunteer pool and solicit suggestions on the next iteration of the WWF from its previous supporters and attendees. In the meantime, we hope all of you will enjoy all the other species that make year-round birding in the Klamath Basin so unique. Please feel free to contact us at [wingskf@gmail.com](mailto:wingskf@gmail.com) with your suggestions.

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## Welcome New ECAS Members

(September, 2023 - December, 2023)

By Miriam Lipsitz

Celia Alaniz	Bend, OR
Dean Angiola	Bend, OR
Geri Baxter	Springfield, OR
Linda Bonotto	Bend, OR
Barbara Edwards	Bend, OR
Margi Finch	Bend, OR
Tim Grabe	Portland, OR
Venita Hardie	LaPine, OR
Alison Holland	Sisters, OR
Peg Morgan	Somerville, MA
Cynthia Shelton	Bend, OR
Larry Weinberg	Bend, OR

**Interested in helping out? VOLUNTEERS NEEDED:  
Membership Committee Chair and Field Trip Project Leader  
Email to ask questions at [ecaudubon@gmail.com](mailto:ecaudubon@gmail.com)**

**Read on about only a few of our awesome ECAS volunteers - so many different ways for you to get involved! A big thank you to Clay, Stu, Gail, Aaron, Matt.....**

## ECAS Volunteer Efforts and Results

### Cabin Lake - December

*By Clayton Crofton, posted on COBOL, Dec 13*

“Cold and quiet. The basins are frozen to the bottom while the guzzler reservoirs are filling with next year's water. Spent the night. There is a trace of snow that shows tracks of deer and other animals. Some old, others new. Coyotes in the distance, ravens overhead and an adult Bald Eagle on a treetop near the guard station ghost town.



The blinds are clean and filled with lawn chairs and newly donated cushions. I moved the journal inside the upper blind for the winter. Look for it on the shelf.

While the ground was frozen I enjoyed the opportunity to wander about without compacting the soil. Found and removed some litter along with old wood piles. If anyone has history about the previous usage of this area, it would be a pleasure to learn about it.” Thanks, Clay!

### Brothers Wildflower Plug Project

*By Stuart Garrett*

In late October 2023 a group of 15 ECAS volunteers planted over 1000 native wildflower plugs on a cooperating private ranch near Brothers Oregon. The Brothers Project is part of an effort by ECAS to restore the sage-steppe of eastern Deschutes County by concentrating on restoring areas that are now depleted of much of the forb/wildflower understory that wildlife need.

This site is located in the northern part of the Brothers Priority Area for Conservation and has an existing but declining sage-grouse population. The wildflower seedling plugs were grown by local central Oregon nurseries from seeds collected in central Oregon. We planted Achillea, Antennaria, Crepis, Dalea, Erigeron, Eriogonum, Eriophyllum, Machaeranthera (Dieteria), Phacelia, and Townsendia. We will monitor the entire plot yearly. Livestock grazing is excluded for now. We will also monitor for sage-grouse and pronghorn use by camera and pellet counts. No herbicides, mowing, or tilling were used.

Thanks to the East Cascades Audubon Society Sage Science Team, the Institute for Applied Ecology, and Terrawest for their support.





# Bird Study Group

By Claire Weiser

Something fun, educational, and new for ECAS began this year. Aaron Jenkins and Gail Snyder had the idea to organize a bird study group using the Cornell Lab Bird Academy program *Ornithology: Comprehensive Bird Biology*, which has both textbook and online components. Eight of us accepted their challenge and now our group of ten is having a fabulous time learning all sorts of things about birds, discussing concepts, and getting to know each other. We meet twice a month at a conference room at the Bend downtown library. All group members pitch in taking turns moderating and presenting, bringing visual aids, and contributing to discussions. We'll finish this program in June.

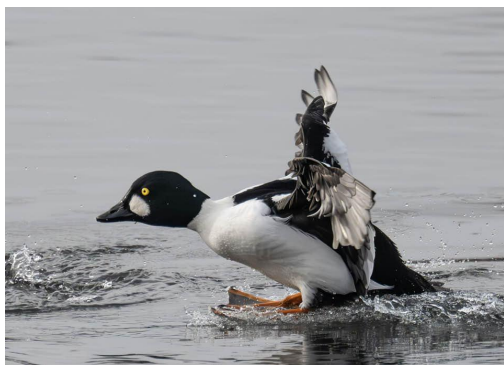


Janet Navarra presents a jeopardy-style game that she made to quiz us on the concepts in Chapter 3.

We're not looking for new members since we're partway through the course. But we did want to let you know that organic groups like this can sprout from any ECAS member's idea. Lynda Paznokas offered and led Beginning Birding classes and Sevilla Rhoads organized Mindful Birding outings on Deschutes Land Trust land. The ECAS website is full of member-inspired contributions like the Nests and Young database. Undoubtedly there are other examples of grass root ideas that came to fruition from members for members to enjoy and benefit from. If you ever have a bird-related idea with a plan that you would be willing to get started and coordinate, let the ECAS Board know. And thanks!

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## Central Oregon Birds of Autumn 2023



Common Goldeneye by Scott Redd on the Deschutes River



Bald Eagle with American Coot by Darrin Underwood on Suttle Lake



Pine Grosbeak by Jean Tuomi near Santiam Pass



Snow Bunting by Chuck Gates at Crooked River Wetlands



Chestnut-backed Chickadee by Sevilla Rhoads at Sunriver/Spring River confluence



Great Blue Heron by Glenn Cantor with Wednesday Birders at the Deschutes River

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## Central Oregon Migration March-April 2023

*By Matt Cahill*

[Matt spent much time and effort last winter-spring 2023 compiling notes which he posted on COBOL about migrating birds and their timetables and appearances in central Oregon. For this Winter issue of the *Calliope* which covers January through March 2024, we thought it would be fun to look back at last year's trends as we look ahead to this year's arrivals. This helps us know what to look for when, and we can compare changes and similarities from last year to this. Plus it's just nice to get in the mood for Spring! - Claire Weiser, *Calliope* editor]



### **Central Oregon Migration - March 19-25, 2023**

After what felt like a very quiet winter for birds, migrants are moving in Central Oregon at last! I looked through eBird at what came in over the past week (March 19th-April 25th) and mused about what we might expect in the coming one (March 26th – April 1st). Just about everything is running behind this year it seems to me. Say's Phoebe might be the winner for the "No Matter What" award on timing and numbers.

Greater White-fronted Goose migration is ramping up with a few more low-number reports this week. Houston Lake typically hits its peak numbers next week. The first drake Cinnamon Teal appeared at Hatfield on March 21st and their numbers should accelerate next week.

A couple White-throated Swifts were seen at Smith Rock on March 18th; they too ought to be multiplying fast here next week. Virginia Rail will be accelerating from their first scattered reports this week into next. A push of Sandhill Cranes through Deschutes County came on March 22 and they are already accumulating in Eastern Washington.

Shorebird firsts this week included Long-billed Curlews and Dunlin at Hatfield with scattered Wilson's Snipe and Greater Yellowlegs. Snipe are tardy already but the rest of that crew comes in full-tilt next week. A couple of flocks of American White Pelicans have sailed over Hatfield as well. Turkey Vultures are steadily increasing and several Osprey have filtered through but the big movement is yet to come – next week?

For Passerines, Say's Phoebes are on schedule at peak migration right now with numbers all over the place, a vanguard Loggerhead Shrike was above Lake Billy Chinook on March 22, and Tree and Violet-green Swallows are starting to stream in (I saw 60 VGs at First St. Rapids on the evening of March 22nd). The swallows are running behind schedule for numbers but next week will hopefully change that.

Ruby-crowned Kinglets are set to explode here next week with first wave numbers already arriving after being basically absent all winter. Mountain Bluebirds began piling on after a quiet winter. American Robin numbers are inching upwards too.

After a finchless winter Red Crossbills appear to be showing their face again. Maybe they were always here, but hidden. A couple Purple Finches were in Bend and I think Cassin's Finches were also. Stray Fox Sparrow reports might just be wintering birds – I haven't seen any resident thick-billed yet myself but they're more a first-week-of-April arrival. Sagebrush Sparrows are out in the sage and should only get more numerous next week, while a trickle of Savannah Sparrows arrived in Deschutes and Crook Counties, same for Lincoln's Sparrows in Bend. Finally, the famous but somewhat tardy Yellow-rumped Warbler made an appearance this week in Bend and Sunriver. They should go exponential next week.

### **What's coming next week? (last week in March, first week in April)**

It's been a long, snowy winter, but if history is a guide several more new arrivals should show up in the next week. This coming week may start the limited window for Ross's Goose in Central Oregon. Grebe and hummingbird diversity climbs historically but I don't know with this weather! Good money would find at least one more shorebird species next week, with Long-billed Dowitcher being the top contender. And Common Loons begin their boreal beeline.

Northern Rough-winged, Barn, and Cliff Swallows are due in the coming days, as are Sage Thrashers. In addition to already-here species quickening their arrivals, the first Brewer's, Chipping, or Vesper Sparrows should show up as April starts. Central Oregon marshes will soon

be more cacophonous with Yellow-headed Blackbirds. It can be fun to see the first Brown-headed Cowbirds arrive too, before their less-welcome multitudes follow later in April. And I predict the first Orange-crowned Warbler by next weekend!

### **What about the birds that stayed for the winter?**

I don't want to downplay our resident and wintering birds. Mallards and Canada Geese are downright aggressive right now cementing pair bonds and owning park turf. Wintering ducks of many stripes are similarly courting before they depart for the north or the mountains. Greater Sage-grouse are parading in force on their leks; Eurasian Collared-doves are parading in force in my backyard. Anna's hummingbirds should be starting to nest (which I still think is crazy). Many of our hawks are scoping their nest sites and most of our owl species are actively hooting their hearts out. The Northern Flickers are flicking. Corvids of all stripes are beginning their nesting regimes too, especially Clark's Nutcrackers up in the snowy subalpine. American Dippers are tinkling their merry song in the rapids, Bushtits are pairing up, and Pygmy Nuthatches are investigating their preferred tree holes. All around the region the ubiquitous House Finch song and Red-winged Blackbird gargling is ringing in Spring.

**Editor's note: The next *Calliope* (Spring issue, out on April 1st) will have Part 2, April-June, of Matt's Central Oregon 2023 migrant observations and predictions so we can compare those to 2024.**

## **Birds in the News**

### **Observing Raptors**

**Where, when and how to see birds of prey in Oregon's high desert**

*By Craig Miller*

Reprinted from *The Source Weekly*, November 22, 2023

Raptors are perhaps the most charismatic and venerated avian species in the world, and Oregon's high desert is a great place to see them. The term "raptor" or "bird of prey" is defined as a bird that kills and eats other animals for food. Hawks and owls both meet the definition, but most owls are secretive and active during the night and therefore not easily observed. Vultures are known to occasionally prey on live animals, but their primary source of food is carrion, and so they are not considered raptors.

#### **Oregon Raptors**

There are 15 regularly occurring species of raptors in Oregon, each possessing its own hunting techniques and habitat preference. Therefore, no one habitat, season, or location is likely to host all species. Birds of prey can be lumped into six groups: eagles, buteos, harriers, osprey, accipiters and falcons.

**Eagles:** Golden Eagles prey on jackrabbits, smaller mammals and carrion and are year-round inhabitants of the high desert. Bald Eagles prefer fish and waterfowl, and therefore are more likely to be found near large bodies of water.



**A Golden Eagle soars over Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. Photo by Dan Streiffert**

**Buteos:** Red-tailed Hawks are by far the most common and variable hawk in Oregon, and can be found year-round in virtually every habitat in Oregon. They are frequently seen perched on utility poles looking for prey. Ferruginous Hawks are high desert residents most often found in sagebrush habitat and other open range, but can also be in agricultural fields during winter. Swainson's Hawks are strictly summer residents of wide-open spaces and farmlands. Red-shouldered Hawks are our smallest buteo, uncommon on the east side and quite shy, preferring tall vegetation or deciduous trees rather than open range.

**Accipiters:** Three accipiter species occur in Oregon: Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk and Northern Goshawk. They are birds of the forest, and their specialty is hunting small birds where there is a lot of vegetation. Although they occur in Oregon year-round, large numbers can be seen migrating south in the fall.

**Harrier:** The only harrier species in Oregon is the Northern Harrier (which some people call a "marsh hawk"). While it does have a preference for marsh areas such as Summer Lake and Klamath Marsh, it also frequents open fields and farmland.

**Osprey:** Strictly depending on fish for its existence, the Osprey is found around open water and migrates south for the winter.

**Falcons:** Falcons are fast flyers with pointed wings. Prairie Falcons are birds of the open range, preying on small mammals such as ground squirrels, cottontail rabbits and wood rats. Peregrine Falcons specialize on small shorebirds, so are most often found near shallow lakes. Merlins feed primarily on birds, and although uncommon, can be found in a wide variety of habitats from

fall to early spring. American Kestrels are our most common and smallest falcon. They feed primarily on small mammals such as voles, mice and shrews, as well as insects such as grasshoppers.



**One of three accipiter species occurring in Oregon, Cooper's Hawks are birds of the forest, and their specialty is hunting small birds where there is a lot of vegetation. Photo by Tara Lemezis**



**Categorized as falcons, Merlins are an uncommon raptor in Oregon's high desert. If spotted, they can be found in a wide variety of habitats from fall to early spring. Photo by Shannon Phifer**

### **Observing Raptors**

When one sets about to find raptors, it helps to know not only where, but also when to look. In Oregon, some raptors are year-round residents; others fly south for the winter and still others arrive from Canada and Alaska to spend the winter in Oregon. The concentration of easily observable raptors is highest during the winter months from late November through late February and lowest during breeding season from April through June. Birds of prey are unsurprisingly attracted to areas where food is most accessible, especially large agricultural fields where ground squirrels, mice, gophers and other small mammals are abundant. Raptors are also attracted to wide open spaces like marshland, mud flats and lakes.

### **Raptor Hotspots in Oregon's High Desert**

**Fort Rock to Christmas Valley** – August through March, Prairie Falcons, Golden Eagles are frequent at Fort Rock State Park, and all the buteos and eagles can be found in the fields and perched on the utility poles along the road from Fort Rock to Christmas Valley.

**Silver Lake** – Buteos and eagles abound in the open fields along Hwy 31 from the town of Silver Lake to Picture Rock Pass. There are plenty of places to pull over to the side of the road to observe and scan.

**Summer Lake Basin** – February through September; all species of raptors can be seen here, depending on the season. Note: The refuge tour loop is closed during hunting season, October through January.

**Klamath Wildlife Refuge** – Fall and winter; especially renowned for its eagles, but all raptors occur here.

**Wickiup Reservoir** – Bald Eagles occur year-round, but especially during fall. Ospreys from April through October.

**Paulina to Rager Ranger Station** – Late fall and early spring; eagles and buteos.

### **Raptor Events**

Another option is to learn about and observe raptors in a group setting. A great entry point is Eagle Watch, an annual celebration event at Round Butte Overlook Park, near Madras. Hosted by the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, Portland General Electric and the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, the Eagle Watch is usually held in February or March.

**CRAIG MILLER** is the geographic information system specialist at Oregon Natural Desert Association, a nonprofit organization that protects and restores Oregon's high desert public lands and waters. Miller leads ONDA's mapping, special analysis and field inventory work, and his roots with the organization go all the way back to the mid-1980s, when he was a founding member.

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## Researchers Look to Fill Gaps in Understanding Tufted Puffins The breeding population remains low in Oregon

By Katie Frankowicz KMUN via *The Astorian* Nov 26, 2023

This reprinted story is part of a collaboration between The Astorian and Coast Community Radio

CANNON BEACH — The puffins are early risers, but so is Tim Halloran. For the past 12 years, he has spent most summer mornings — and many sunsets — with his binoculars aimed at a Tufted Puffin colony on Haystack Rock. Minute by minute, over a series of two-hour shifts, Halloran notes where he sees puffins on the rock and if they're engaged in any interesting behavior — fighting with other seabirds or perhaps approaching another puffin and rapidly knocking bills together, a type of courtship behavior called “billing.” The information Halloran collects informs the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates of the colony's size each year.

Last summer, the colony count was the lowest it had ever been since the Fish and Wildlife Service began monitoring: only 74 puffins. A concerning number given the marked decline of Tufted Puffins off the Oregon Coast — and along their entire southern range — in recent years. Halloran was prepared for more disappointing news this fall as the puffins' breeding season ended and the birds began to leave the rock. But after Fish and Wildlife Service biologists combined Halloran's numbers with surveys conducted by boat on the back side of Haystack Rock, they estimated the colony's population at 106 birds. “So I was very glad that my guess was too conservative,” Halloran said, “and that, in fact, it was a better year than I had feared.” Shawn Stephensen, a wildlife biologist with the Fish and Wildlife Service, said the number comes with some caveats. The bottom line is that the increase observed this summer is not significant. “It's a slight increase,” Stephensen said, “and that's the best way to put it.” “It's not a sustainable population,” said Angela Benton, board chair for the Friends of Haystack Rock, a stewardship organization that has put resources toward educating people about the puffins and supporting protections for the iconic seabird.



A survey in the late 1980s documented thousands of Tufted Puffins off the Oregon Coast. By 2008, when the Fish and Wildlife Service conducted another survey, researchers found that number had dropped into the hundreds. The most recent survey of Tufted Puffins in Oregon occurred in 2021. While there was some improvement over the 2008 numbers, the estimated breeding population in the state was still low at 553 birds. On Haystack Rock, the seasonal breeding population typically ranges from 43 to 100 birds. The slight increase recorded this summer comes at a time when a number of efforts are in motion — for the Haystack Rock colony in particular and Tufted Puffins in general along the California, Oregon and Washington state coasts. Last year, the Friends of Haystack Rock entered a partnership with the National Audubon Society. This September, the society hired Katherine Luscher as senior coordinator for Tufted Puffins. In this role, she will work closely with the many stakeholders involved in this puffin population restoration — to share resources and information, to help with communication, and identify any gaps. “(Tufted Puffins) are an easy-to-love species,” Benton said, “but they’re telling us something about what’s going on in our oceans, and we really need to care. And our biggest concern is moving forward fast enough to prevent the full collapse of the species on the West Coast.

”The partnership with the National Audubon Society and Luscher’s hiring followed an unsuccessful attempt to petition the Fish and Wildlife Service to list Tufted Puffins under the federal Endangered Species Act — specifically those that breed in the California Current off California, Oregon and Washington state, where populations have seen significant decline. Tufted Puffins are listed as endangered in Washington state and as sensitive in Oregon. They are considered a species of special concern in California. The Fish and Wildlife Service, however, considered the whole of the seabirds’ range in their investigation and found that populations in the north remain robust. Stephensen said ongoing genetic sampling has not shown that Tufted Puffins nesting and breeding in the south are a genetically distinct population. But the seabirds’ decline in the south remains a concern, Stephensen said. The Fish and Wildlife Service has taken a number of steps to try to improve habitat at breeding sites by removing invasive plants that impact puffin burrows and identifying and removing predators at islands on Oregon’s southern coast. Recent studies attribute the drop in puffin populations to a variety of factors, including environmental damage caused by oil spills, a rise in natural predators like bald eagles, invasive plant species at nesting sites and shifting ocean conditions, among other things. Stephensen said the unknown is important to keep in mind. Puffins arrive at colony sites like Haystack Rock in the late spring and stay through summer to breed. But much of their lives are lived out on the ocean where unknown and shifting conditions shape much of what researchers see closer to land. “Last year could have been a poor year for the puffins,” Stephensen said. “Maybe there wasn’t enough prey available for them. I don’t know why the numbers were so low ... each year is a little bit different and the birds sometimes nest in higher numbers and sometimes they don’t.”

At Haystack Rock, researchers are trying to fill some of the gaps. Rachael Orben, an assistant professor and researcher at Oregon State University, has been leading efforts to document what puffins eat by taking high-quality photographs of the seabirds as they land at burrows on Haystack Rock. Elsewhere, researchers might collect this kind of diet data by placing screens at the mouths of burrows. When puffins discover they can’t enter their burrow, they drop the fish and fly off. Scientists can then go and collect the fish. This requires accessing nesting areas, crawling around the colony and taking away food from the birds. At Haystack Rock, Orben said that’s just not physically possible. And: “It’s an invasive method of data collection ... you’re disturbing the colony and stealing fish from growing chicks, which is not something that we would really want to do on the Oregon Coast with such a small population.”

Photography allows researchers to keep their distance and still — hopefully — get the data they need. On the Oregon Coast, there had previously been very little diet data for puffins beyond some work done in the early 1980s along the state’s southern coast. “So our efforts at Haystack Rock are really to try to fill some basic natural history gaps for the species in Oregon,” Orben said, “to better understand what food — what prey — are important to them to successfully raise their chicks.” Tufted Puffins navigate a large range and they feed on what is available in different areas. They can load fish up in their bill as they catch them, which sometimes makes it difficult for researchers examining photos later to tease apart exactly what the bird is bringing home for dinner. Which fish head goes with which fish tail? The Oregon State researchers are just beginning to develop a baseline dataset. Puffins are long-lived seabirds and longer-term datasets are crucial to understanding connections between diet, the puffins and fluctuations in their environment. But Orben said even a single year of data collected through the photos has been revealing. “With our initial data collection effort, we did learn a lot because what we knew before was pretty much our best guess,” she said. Orben hopes the diet information Oregon State collects will eventually help provide important context for protecting Tufted Puffins and reveal ways to help conserve and preserve their populations in Oregon. A photographer will be out on the beach again next summer to gather more data.

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## Seabird Cameras

<https://seabirdinstitute.audubon.org/conservation/audubon-live-cams>

The Audubon Seabird Institute, in partnership with explore.org, makes it possible for you to watch puffins, razorbills, terns, and osprey find mates, build nests, socialize and raise their chicks during the spring and summer months.



Atlantic Puffin Loafing Ledge Photo: Cam Fan Zel



Seal Island NWR is host to five seabird live streamed cams during the nesting season. Watch puffins, guillemots, and their relatives the razorbills and murres and others on the [Puffin Loafing Ledge Cam](#) and the [Boulder Berm Cam](#). The Boulder Berm Cam, with infrared capabilities, has offered an excellent stream for watching pufflings during their night time fledges. You will also get glimpses of our tern population, along with other assorted visitors.

Perhaps the most exciting live cams are those located inside Atlantic Puffin and Black Guillemot burrows. This past year, a returning Puffin pair welcomed a hatchling to the burrow in early June. The puffling earned a reputation for being an especially tough chick after fighting back against puffin intruders in the burrow. It fledged in early August. The [Puffin Burrow Cam](#), [Puffin Burrow Exterior View Cam](#), and [Black Guillemot Burrow Cam](#) are definitely the fan favorites, as they are able to give viewers a glimpse into the life of puffin and guillemot families raising their young.



**Atlantic Puffin Burrow Cam Photo: Cam Fan YasushiMiyazaw**

The Guillemot burrow is the one to watch in 2024. Last year viewers observed a turf war in the burrow between a Black Guillemot pair and a pair of exploratory puffins. It remains to be seen who will claim the burrow as their own this coming season.



**Black Guillemot Burrow Cam Photo: Cam Fan Bookmom**

# EAST CASCADES AUDUBON SOCIETY

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Laurel Collins  
Margi Finch  
Aaron Jenkins  
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Brian MacDonald  
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Gordon Wetzel

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Grants	Brian MacDonald
Membership	Vacant
Education	Sherrie Pierce
Conservation Science	Laurel Collins

## Program Leaders

Birders' Night	Gordon, Duke, Wendy, Aaron
Field Trips	vacant
Volunteers	Mary Shivell

## Winter 2024 Board Meetings

January 2  
February 13  
March 5

Board meetings are held on the first Tuesday of the month 6 - 8pm. Members are welcome to attend. For the Zoom code, email [ecaudubon@gmail.com](mailto:ecaudubon@gmail.com) at least 2 days in advance.

Minutes and meeting dates are posted at [www.ecaudubon.org/board-meeting-minutes](http://www.ecaudubon.org/board-meeting-minutes)

The East Cascades Audubon Society (ECAS) is a 501(c)(3) organization that furthers knowledge and appreciation of birds and their habitats through field trips, education, and field studies.

Join ECAS and help preserve the birds of central Oregon at <https://www.ecaudubon.org/become-a-member/>

## Newsletters

Sherrie Pierce, *Chatter* (monthly) Editor  
Claire Weiser, *Calliope* (quarterly) Editor

