

THE FISH HAWK HERALD



Coeur d'Alene Chapter of the National Audubon Society
www.cdaudubon.org

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Articles for the newsletters are welcome. Please submit to the editor Shirley Sturts at: shirley.sturts@gmail.com by the 15th of each month. All submissions are subject to editing.
Thank you and happy reading!

NOVEMBER MEETING

DATE: November 3, Tuesday
PLACE: Lutheran Church of the Master 4800 North Ramsey
TIME: 7:00 p.m.
SPEAKER: Anne Dailey
PROGRAM: "Updating the Superfund Cleanup Plan for the Upper Coeur d'Alene Basin"

Come learn about EPA's plans to improve the Coeur d'Alene Basin Superfund cleanup plan. Changes to the cleanup plan will result in a more complete cleanup in the Basin. It will ensure better protection from historic mine wastes for human health, local water quality, wildlife and habitat.

Our Speaker, Anne Dailey

- BS in Geology and MS in Oceanography
- Environmental Protection Agency Region 10 Environmental Scientist and Project Manager
- With the EPA for 23 years, and 11 years working on Coeur d'Alene Basin issues (12 years in the Environmental Cleanup program and previous 11 years in Water program)
- Worked previously for USGS and Golder Associates (geotech firm)
- Member of Seattle chapter of Audubon Society for many years.

THE SOUTH HILLS CROSSBILL

A new species for Idaho?

Lisa Hardy



Red Crossbills inhabit the coniferous forest where they feed on the seeds they extract from pines and other conifers. They are social nomads, flocking together to range across the forest to areas with heavy cone crops. A hike in the mountains often turns up a flyover of birds uttering their single note flight call. In winter, we get better looks at these birds with their bizarre crossed bills when they visit our backyard feeders.

Red Crossbills have been the subject of increasingly detailed studies over the last several decades. Sub-populations have evolved that are adapted to feeding on particular species of conifers. Ten of these sub-populations, known as "Types" have been identified so far in North America. The differences in bill and body measurements that distinguish these Types are subtle, and field identification depends upon discernible differences in the call notes. Discernible, that is, to the experienced ear....

Type 2, a relatively large bird that specializes in ponderosa pine, is probably the most common type in the Coeur d'Alene-Spokane area. To the east, in the wetter forest of the Coeur d'Alene River drainage, one of the smaller types, such as Type 1 or Type 4, is probably the most common.

Continued on Page 2

THE SOUTH HILLS CROSSBILL



Continued from Page 1

Photo by Wayne Tree

In September, Shirley Sturts and I traveled to Boise to attend a Western Field Ornithologists conference. The keynote speaker was Dr.

Craig Benkman, who has recently proposed that a population of Red Crossbills in the South Hills of southern Idaho are a separate species. Now, I don't want to get bogged down in a discussion of the species concept here (it is a very contentious subject amongst biologists), but the idea of reproductive isolation of a population is frequently cited as the "gold standard" for species differentiation. And Benkman has assembled the evidence of reproductive isolation of the South Hills population, presented in a recent paper published in *Condor*.

There are probably any number of other bird populations that would qualify as separate species if only their stories were known. These are "cryptic" populations, showing only slight differences in morphology to the human observer, but whose members can distinguish amongst themselves sufficiently to choose partners from their own kind. These cryptic populations just have to wait to receive their species-level status until a researcher takes up their cause, studies their behavior, analyzes their genetic makeup, and "lobbies" for them.

Benkman is a good lobbyist for the South Hills crossbills: modest and thoughtful, he somehow conveys his sense of delight in the natural world that has maintained his interest in assembling the crossbill story over the decades. In his talk, he showed how crossbills' bills and palate are adapted to feeding on pine seeds, and why a given bill shape is more efficient at feeding on a particular species of pine. (When he showed a slow-motion video clip of a crossbill using its specialized bill in a sideways maneuver to open a cone scale and extract the seed with its tongue, the audience erupted in cheers. Who knew what was going on up there in the tree tops?)

As an aside, I was impressed by Benkman's unwillingness to sacrifice birds for the purpose of examining the structure of their palates. Palate structure was an important piece of the puzzle in studying the specialized adaptations of the various Types. Benkman was happy to discover a dental procedure which allowed him to make impressions of the palates of living birds. Although his subjects

were probably not happy to have their palates pressed into a block of dental goo, it led to a more favorable outcome for all concerned.

In 1997, Benkman recognized that the South Hills crossbills represented a new Type, and became interested in studying them because of the absence of squirrels there. The lodgepole forests of the South Hills are isolated from other squirrel-inhabited mountain ranges by large stretches of sagebrush desert. Squirrels are major consumers of conifer seeds and in their absence, crossbills became "the main selective agent on cone structure". The result has been that the lodgepole cones have become larger and the scales of the cones have become thicker, causing "reciprocal selection" for larger-billed crossbills. Benkman terms this a "co-evolutionary arms race".

Benkman has proposed the scientific name *Loxia sinesciuris* for this potential new species. The species name means "without squirrels". The common name would be South Hills Crossbill. It would be the only species found only in Idaho, and would probably generate a small cottage industry catering to rabid listers.

The day after Benkman's talk, listers and non-listers alike piled into vans for the long drive to the South Hills, near the point on the map where Idaho, Nevada and Utah come together. We drove up a small canyon cut into sagebrush-covered hills, until at about 6000' elevation we reached the "forest", composed of strips of lodgepole and subalpine fir along the ridge tops. As we spilled out of the vans, we heard crossbills, but they turned out to be Type 5, which are also present in the South Hills. Very few of us were able to identify the Types by ear, but Benkman was, of course, quite familiar with them, and a teenage hotshot birder from Washington, Taylor Brooks, was able to identify the call notes of the different Types with confidence. Within 10 minutes, a group of Type 9, the South Hills crossbills, flew in to feed on a nearby lodgepole, and we all had good looks and "listens".

The ecology of the South Hills crossbills is a result of a complex convergence of geology, climate and biology, and now that ecology appears to be converging to the vanishing point. Climate change is expected to eliminate lodgepole pine from the South Hills in the next 100 years, probably resulting in the extirpation of this small population. It would be ironic

Continued on Page 3

THE SOUTH HILLS CROSSBILL

Continued from Page 2

for this population to be assigned species-level status, only to watch it become extinct. The South Hills crossbill story suggests, though, that there have been other isolated, specialized populations of crossbills that have become extinct as a result of the normal climate swings in the past. We can only guess what these dead ends may have been like.

Links

<http://research.amnh.org/ornithology/crossbills/index.html>

<http://www.uwyo.edu/benkman/>

BIRDING PELEE ISLAND

Kris Buchler

Many would ask, “where is Pelee Island and why would anyone want to go there?” There are two good reasons – birds and wine! Ed and I went for the first and discovered the second. Pelee Island is the southernmost inhabited part of Canada and is on the same latitude as Mendocino County, California, and Rome, Italy. It is in the midst of the warmest of the Great Lakes – Lake Erie. The island is rich in natural beauty and enjoys an unusually lengthy and warm growing season. It is primarily agricultural with scattered hardwood forests and some marsh lands.

Pelee Island is located at the confluence of two migration routes – the Atlantic Flyway and the Mississippi Flyway. It is an important stopover site for many species and is designated as a globally Important Bird Area (IBA), by the Canadian partners of Birdlife International, the Canadian Nature Federation, and Bird Studies Canada. Just north of the island is Point Pelee, renown as a migrant trap, where thousands of spring migrants rest, feed and recover while migrating north to breeding grounds. It attracts tens of thousands of birders during migration. The advantage to birding Pelee Island is the fewer numbers of spring birders due to limited lodging and an hour and a half ferry ride to the island.

John Shipley, of Kingfisher Tours, was our guide, as he was on two other trips we took, one to Alaska and one to S. E. Arizona. He is well-organized, only takes small groups (there were 6 of us) and ensures that everyone has the opportunity to see and observe the species we are seeking. This was a trip aimed at seeing spring warblers as well as other songbird migrants. We tallied 22 warbler species, with excellent looks at most of them. We didn't find a

Kirtland's Warbler but had many great looks at Blackburnian, Blackpoll, Bay-breasted, Magnolia, Mourning and Tennessee, all lifers for us. We had seen the beautiful Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Green and Chestnut-sided, in Florida as well as the Prairie and Palm Warblers.



Black-throated Blue Warbler (Rare in Idaho)
Photographed by Patrick Kolar, Idaho Bird Observatory

Our most memorable warbler was a luminescent, yellow Prothonotary, singing from the roof of a nest box he was claiming in a dark swamp. He has a very loud voice and I was observing two House Wrens on a nestbox in the swamp when a flash of gold caught my eye. We observed this bird two other days and John reported seeing it the following week with another group of birders. It is sad to say it had still failed to attract a female at that time.

Flycatchers were on the move and John sharpened our observation skills in identifying them by sight as they were not vocalizing at the beginning of our trip. Later in the week I was saved by Least Flycatchers who began their customary “chebek, chebek, chebek”. Other flycatchers on the island were Eastern Wood-Pewee, Yellow-bellied, Willow and Eastern Phoebe.

Seeing cuckoos again was exciting. I found a Black-billed Cuckoo on the north end of the island. It was silent as it sat high in a tree 25 feet off-shore but its red eye was unmistakable. Ed found the Yellow-billed Cuckoo at our lunch stop one day. It was vocalizing but we had trouble finding it.

Feeling the pulse of the island took a couple of days. Weather is extremely important and has dramatic effects on the movements of birds and their location on the island. Good weather can actually reduce

Continued on page 4

BIRDING PELEE ISLAND

Continued from page 3

the tendency of the birds to congregate and stack up on the island. Some winds can cause a temporary "reverse" migration where the birds fly south again, even back to the mainland.

Our best birding spot was a trail at the northern tip of the island. It wove through deciduous forest tangled with vines and broken up with canals and small swamps. It exited onto a gravel beach and then continued south again at the edge of the forest. This gave us good viewing and easy movement. We returned to this spot one to several times a day, each time being different and producing a new bird. We also observed a fairly rare species of turtle here – Blandings. We spent many hours on the grounds of a large estate, walked other trails through the interior of the island and explored the dunes of the Fish Point Nature Preserve at the southern tip of the seven mile long island.

It is exciting to bird new areas of the country, seeing new species and different habitats. Going with an experienced guide increases your opportunities to see birds, compensates for not knowing the songs of new species and can be a wonderful learning experience with a good guide.

We were able to have a guided tour of the Pelee Island Heritage Museum which houses a collection of historical and paleontological artifacts. High on the list of our group was a visit to the Pelee Island Wine Pavilion for wine tasting. The wines were quite good and all labels featured different species of birds.

If I did this trip again, I would add two days to the trip as well as the week on the island. I would spend one day at Point Pelee and spend one day traveling into Michigan to find the Kirtland's Warbler.

OBSERVATION POST

2009 Kootenai County Big Year - as of September 20 is 187 -- go to our website for a complete list and see what species we need.

1 Red-throated Loon and 3 Surf Scoter - October 16 and 22 - Hayden Lake - Lisa Hardy and Doug Ward

1st fall Northern Shrike and possibly the last summer Western Bluebird October 13 - Mica Bay Survey - Kris Buchler, Roland Craft, Janet Callen

MICA BAY OBSERVATION DECK CLEANUP

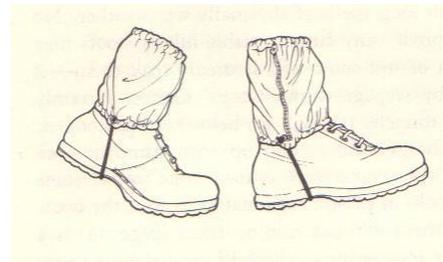
Ed Buchler

On 19 September several of us gathered to perform maintenance on the Gertie Hansen viewing platform near Mica Bay. In about three hours we were able to trim back brush and low limbs along the trail and reduce the height of a number of bushes and tree limbs that had obscured the view of the lake. We also sealed all surfaces of the platform to protect it from the weather and scrubbed down the signs. Many thanks to the following for giving up half of their Saturday: Roland Craft, Jerry & Sharon Hanson, Keith Sturts, Ronn & Roberta Rich, Jan Severtson, Jenny Taylor and Carrie Hugo (with Iva Dell in a supervisory role). Special thanks go to Roland who came before the event to clean off the deck and afterward to give it a second coat of sealer which he generously provided.

MINERAL POINT FIELD TRIP

September 26, 2009

Judy Waring



Three years ago Janet Callen and I walked the Mineral Point trail south of Sandpoint on a lovely fall day. The trail winds

through a wooded hillside down to a campground overlooking Lake Pend Oreille, a beautiful walk with the promise of good, fall migratory birding. We decided at that time that we would like to lead an Audubon field trip on this scenic route and after two failed attempts we finally succeeded. On the first try we couldn't get to the trailhead because of the threat of fire, and the second trip was taken in a pouring, cold rain. But this time Mother Nature smiled on us.

Eight Auduboners - Janet Callen, Mike and Val Zagar, Jan Severtson, Adela Sussman, Roland Craft, Phil and Judy Waring - enjoyed a good walk and identified Common Raven, American Crow, Turkey, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Hairy Woodpecker, Winter Wren, Black-capped Chickadee, Northern Flicker, Pygmy Nuthatch, and Osprey. (We won't be talking about the end-of-the-day walk around Lost Lake. Suffice to say, the lake is aptly named).

MARIE CREEK - OCT. 17, 2009

Dick Cripe



Photograph by Bill Linn

We could call these "Nature Walks" as well as birding trips what with forester Roland Craft and geologist Lisa Hardy, plus the various gardeners and amateur botanists. The Marie Creek trail is maintained by a horse-riding group and is off limits to all motorized travel. The trail climbs for a mile over a low ridge before dropping into the Marie Creek drainage. The ridge supports a mixed, second-growth forest while the creek area has very large grand fir as well as new hemlocks. The latter will eventually replace the fir and become the climax forest. In addition to identifying birds, we tried to identify and comprehend some of the signs of previous human activity. We saw several birds typical of the forest at this time of year - Black-capped Chickadee-3, Hairy Woodpecker-1, and Pileated Woodpecker-2, Northern Flicker-1, Ruffed Grouse-1, Red-breasted Nuthatch-11, Dark-eyed Junco-1, Connon Raven-1, Winter Wren-5, American Robin-6, Red Crossbill-4, Steller's Jay-1, and Wild Turkey-14.

The weather was fine. It was overcast, but warm and we all shed layers of clothes as the morning progressed. When we returned to the parking lot the rain came, but didn't last long. We proceeded to Wolf Lodge Bay and then Beauty Bay to check out the waterfowl. Conditions were clear and we were able to see quite a bit in a short time: Mallard-2, Common Merganser-1, Common Loon-8, Horned Grebe-5, Red-necked Grebe-1, Western Grebe-1, Double-crested Cormorant-1, Ring-billed Gull-10. Participants were Janet Callen, Roland Craft, Lisa Hardy, Dick and Antje Cripe. All agreed it turned out to be a fine day for this time of year and we enjoyed getting out and hiking a bit.

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FIELD TRIPS

PLEASE REGISTER: Watch the website or newsletter for updates to our field trip schedule. Participants should contact the trip leader at least 24 hours in advance of the field trip to find out if the meeting place/time or destination has been changed. Participants will share in a mileage reimbursement for the driver.

MICA BAY SURVEY

DATES: November 10, Tuesday (held 2nd Tuesday of each month - times vary depending on month)

TIME: 8:00 a.m.

MEET: Fairmont Loop and Highway 95

LEADER: Shirley Sturts 664-5318

ACTIVITY: We spend about 3 hours once a month counting birds at Mica Bay.

Everybody is welcome. Beginning birders are welcome. We will help you with identification skills.

TRAIL OF THE COEUR D' ALENES

DATE: November 14th, Saturday

TIME: 8:30 a.m.

MEET: Fernan Ranger Station

LEADER: Jan Severtson, 667-6209

DESTINATION: Cataldo area of the Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes. This will be a walking tour along this beautiful portion of the trail. It will be a 3/4 day event, eating lunch at the Cataldo Mission Cafe--(quaint). Anyone wishing to visit the Mission after lunch may do so. It is well worth the time! Dress appropriately, and bring water.

CHRISTMAS COUNTS : (Tentative Dates)

Contact Shirley Sturts 664-5318 or shirley.sturts@gmail.com

Coeur d'Alene - week of December 16

Spirit Lake - January 2, Saturday

Indian Mountain - January 4, Monday

