Comments for Snowy Plover Status Review Due by Aug. 5 - see pg. 16.

Washington Ornithological Society News

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WOSNews No. 197 June - July 2022

From the Board

Kim Thorburn

The opportunity for comradery with really neat people who share a passion for birds and the dedication of volunteers who keep our organization well-oiled are the most meaningful parts of my participation in WOS. As with all the organizational functions, officers and board members are volunteers, too, which means the board turns its attention to recruiting officer and board candidates each spring.

This year, we have not formed a nominating committee but instead, spent time during board meetings identifying potential contenders. As of this writing, we are still seeking candidates for president and vice president. The term of officers is one year. Presidents, such as our current president, Jennifer Kauffman, usually serve more than one term because a year passes quickly as one learns the leadership ropes. The board has discussed possible bylaws amendments to create an officer succession plan, such as president-elect, president, and past president, to overcome the nearly yearly challenge of finding volunteers for officer positions.

Sage Thrasher, Larry Jordan photo

An ad hoc bylaws committee has been a parking-lot issue while we've spent most of our recent attention on conference planning. The board also kicked off the revamped Patrick Sullivan Young

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Swan Song

Ron Post, Editor

We'll first name just a few of the many birders that have helped put the newsletter out for the past six years: each and every president of the board; our very special Webmaster, Jane Hadley; Field Notes guy supreme Ryan Merrill; and a writer unequaled in our state, essayist Tom Bancroft. My sincere thanks to the new editor, Chris Rurik, and all past and future WOSNews contributors.

see New Editor on page 11

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WASHINGTON ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY
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The Washington Ornithological Society was chartered in 1988 to increase knowledge of the birds of Washington and to enhance communication among all persons interested in those birds. WOS is a nonprofit educational organization under 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue code.

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Board Member.....Kim Thorburn (Spokane).....Kim@wos.org

From the Board (cont.)

Birders Fund Award program with the successful initiation, spearheaded by Ed Pullen, of outreach to undergraduate programs to provide scholarship support for research endeavors. The goal of this facet of the PSYB program is to cast a wide net to reach programs for underserved populations to diversify our community.

Finally, the board was pleased at a recent meeting to welcome the new WOS News editor, Chris Rurik. And we can't let veteran editor Ron Post's last issue go by without expressing our huge gratitude for his six years of volunteer service to WOS. As we looked at ways to honor Ron's service, we went back to all his issues. As a book, they would fill several volumes! We look forward to more recognition of Ron in Spokane Valley.

Thanks to artist Lisa Hill for providing this image of a 2022 conference poster.

Thanks for the Box Ride (Not!)

This is a screen shot from an online video about releasing rescued birds, from Martin Tyner and the Southest Wildlife Foundation of Utah. Tyner has spent 40-50 years rescuing and rehabilitating wild animals for release (in some cases keeping them as wildlife ambasasadors in educational capacities.) He is also a falconer. The shadow of the American Kestrel on the door of the transport box looks somewwhat like a hand waving goodbye!

In Absolute Awe

Story and Photos by Tom Bancroft

The sky up the Rio Colorado glowed, dawn would soon arrive, but right then, it was dark in these montane forests of Western Panama. I was studying the thick understory for any detectable movements. The PWUT notes of Swainson's Thrushes were everywhere. At least a dozen were active, having just woken from their nightly snooze. The intensity of these up-slurred notes implied an anxiousness. They probably wanted to begin feeding in earnest, but it was still too dark. And I couldn't spot a single one.

These would be the "Olive-backed" group of this species. They nest in the boreal forests of North America and winter in the Andes Mountains of South America, traveling five, six, seven, even eight thousand miles on their migrations in the fall and then again in the spring. They were on their northern bound leg on that April morning, heading back to their breeding grounds. They pass through Panama, spending time here fattening up on insects and fruit before their next leg.

I'd hoped they might still be here when I planned this trip to the Cordillera de Talamanca. The concept was to come in late April to celebrate that my shoulder was recovering. I'd had reconstructive surgery the previous September after tearing two rotator cuff muscles. Five years ago, I came here for the first time, and that trip was during the first few days of April. I planned that journey to visit a friend that I was dating at the time. She was in Panama for four months to study Spanish and invited me to come but said I also had to have a reason independent of her. I picked this place for us to meet partly because I wanted to see Resplendent Quetzals and Three-wattled Bellbirds, two species I'd known for decades from photographs and from reading about their biology and lore, yet had never seen. The lodge owner told me that these two species should be back on the Pacific slope if I came in April. They live in the Caribbean lowlands from early fall through most of March. These are altitudinal migrants chasing the rains and the fruits that come with precipitation.

He added that I'd be here during the transition month between the dry and full-on rainy seasons. This was when many local species began to breed, including those two. Many bird species eat fruits from trees in the family Lauraceae, think avocados. A forest produces many kinds of miniature avocados, and those fruits raise the next generation of birds. Another ecological phenomenon I knew from books. He closed our conversations with a side comment that the Swainson's Thrushes

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In Absolute Awe (continued)

would be here then, too. And that note piqued my excitement even more.

I'd first seen Swainson's Thrush as a teenager in high school. We'd found one someplace in Western Pennsylvania when it was moving through, still heading north to Canada. Now, I live in the Pacific Northwest, where they come for the summer, singing their beautifully dynamic melody. Each male has half a dozen song types consisting of a series of over-slurred phrases that successively go higher and higher in pitch. This upward spiraling tune is like a woodwind ensemble out in the forest. Each spring, I try to find one singing, and then I stand, listening, in absolute awe.

Suddenly, some movement happened in the Panamanian forest before me, and I put my binoculars right on a Swainson's Thrush. Incredibly, this one might be several hundred miles farther north in another day or two. It takes them twenty to thirty flights to cover the distance from their winter grounds to their breeding grounds. They need a few days in between each leg to refuel their bodies.

Five years ago, I remembered telling some friends at home that I would see our own Swainson's Thrushes in Panama, but later, I would discover that the Swainson's Thrushes breeding near Seattle do not fly to the Andes for the winter but rather go to Central America. Actually, on that first trip, I hadn't even known there were two major "groups" of Swainson's Thrushes. I always marvel at the details and that there is so much still to learn about the natural world that is incredibly unbelievable and astoundingly inspiring.

Standing there in Panama, I tried to comprehend this bird's migration in light of how much it weighs and its size. Last fall I went into my Seattle kitchen and poured some garbanzo beans into a glass mixing bowl. I started adding individual beans to my food scale until it read a hair under one ounce, the average weight of a Swainson's Thrush. I counted 48 dried organic beans as I moved them back to a small juice glass so I could have them sit on my desk. I also grabbed a ruler to study. Measuring from wingtip to wingtip on a flying Swainson's Thrush is only 10 inches, less than one foot. That is all, and yet this bird flies from the Andes of South America to the boreal forests of North America. It does it on its own, finding its own way; no one helps. Although it might be flying when thousands of other Swainson's Thrushes are flying, it does it entirely by itself, navigating, flapping, going by its own accord.

What I hadn't understood was that the Swainson's Thrushes, the "Russet-backs," we have breeding west of the Cascade Crest do not go to the Andes, they instead winter in southern Mexico and Central America. The ones that winter in the Andes are the "Olive-backed" variety. Okay, this species was even more mesmerizing.

Swainson's Thrushes are in the genus *Catharus*, Greek for pure and clean. The genus evolved in Latin America. There are 12 currently recognized species in *Catharus,* five that occur in the United States and seven found only in Latin America. This genus, a member of the thrush family, evolved in the last four to ten million years and the ancestor of the Swainson's Thrush

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In Absolute Awe (continued)

was the first member to become migratory. Our other Northern American species, Hermit, Gray-cheeked, Veery, and Bicknell's, are closely related and evolved from a different ancestor who took up migration, then gradually evolved into different species.

Finally, the Panamanian forest became light enough that I could see better, and the Swainson's thrushes were jumping around in the understory of the Chiriqui's highlands. In addition, two in the distance were practicing their songs. Neither seemed to have it quite right; the notes didn't come together perfectly.

I was spellbound trying to comprehend this bird, its life, its evolution. And how much I still didn't understand, needed to learn, and maybe more importantly, should marvel about. So, indeed there are two groups of Swainson's Thrushes. One, "Russet-backed," breed along the West Coast of the United States and about halfway up British Columbia. The other, "Olive-backed," breeds all across the boreal forests of Canada and down the Rocky Mountains as far as New Mexico and Arizona. East of the Cascade Crest are olive backs. As I stood there in that Panamanian forest, it dawned on me that the ones I saw last summer in the Okanogan could be those that I was seeing on this trip in Panama. They would be the "Olive-backed" variety, wow, I still hadn't put it all together. With this realization, I had to find a log along the trail at Mount Totumas to sit, listen. How did this all happen; what drove this division within this species? Their migration patterns, their lives.

In the summer of 2021, the American Ornithological Society was considering a proposal to separate Swainson's Thrushes into two species, the Olive-backed and the Russet-backed. The breeding ranges of these two birds overlap in a narrow band in central to northern British Columbia. There they do interbreed, but it appears hybrid offspring don't survive as well. On migration after breeding, Olive-backs fly east, then south through the eastern United States, across the Gulf of Mexico, and eventually south into the Andes Mountains. While the Russet-backed stay on the West Coast, flying south as far as southern Mexico and Central America. The scientific evidence suggests that their hybrids don't know what to do. In conversation with a friend about this new knowledge of mine, I joked that hybrids fly to Iowa. We both laughed.

Last summer, the American Ornithological Society decided not to divide this species into two. Apparently, they thought the scientific justification wasn't sufficient. So, as I sat on a mossy log in Panama, the words of Robin Wahl Kimmerer came to mind. Naming something is a measure of respect, showing respect, acknowledging that something is different from something else, unique. It is also about slowing down, and taking

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In Absolute Awe (continued)

the time to watch, listen, and think. So what if the science isn't there? These birds are marvelous and mind-boggling.

Evolutionary scientists think that a species needs geographic separation to evolve into separate species. Except for that small zone of overlap in British Columbia, the two groups of Swainson's Thrushes are separated by the Cascade Mountains and different breeding areas. Perhaps there had been even more separation in the past that had allowed divergence. The four Pleistocene glaciations that sent large continental-wide ice sheets down across North America may have played a role. Boreal and coniferous forests were divided by those glaciers into eastern and western sections with vast grasslands and other habitats across the central continent.

After the ice retreated, the two groups came back together, and because the separation wasn't complete, they could interbreed. If, though, hybrids are at a survival disadvantage, their evolution might continue, and our science will recognize them as separate species at some point.

A Swainson's Thrush suddenly appeared on the trail, maybe 75 feet away. It flitted along as if teasing me to follow and then dashed into the thicket. My heart churned a little, seeing its athleticism and had to laugh at myself. I started to train for this trip three months ago but then hurt my foot in February, preventing me from getting into shape.

These trails at 6500 feet were making this sea-level person puff and strain. I was chastising myself for being such a wimp when this bird dashed. It seemed to say, "Get over yourself, move on, you're here, aren't you?" And the thrushes were here in abundance; their attitude seemed to raise my weary soul. I climbed back to my feet, looked up the trail, and decided, of course, I could walk another mile or so and still be back to the lodge for breakfast.

A quarter-mile farther into the forest, a lone thrush began singing that upward spiraling song. Perhaps, this individual is headed to the Okanogan in north-central Washington. I wondered what route it might take. Maybe up through the Yucatan, then across to Louisiana, up the west-side of the Appalachians and west to Washington. According to a recent Scientific American article, songbirds, like this thrush, can use their eyes to see the magnetism of the earth and they use it along with the sun and the stars to guide themselves on their travels. So much to marvel about and so much more to learn.

The Back Acre: A Small, Special Place to Draw You In, Told by WOS Birders

Story and Photos by Jane Hadley

A view of the Cascdes with Barnaby Slough foregroumd

Two years ago on June 19, 2020, in the throes of the pandemic lockdown, my husband and I were stuck in our house, always eager for opportunities to safely venture out. Many local parks were way too crowded, sometimes closed, or old hat, so we began taking day trips to spots in the countryside. One of the best I remember was a trip up to the Rockport area. We explored Martin Road, just south of Rockport, on the south side of the Skagit River, and were delighted to discover within 10 or 15 feet of us a Red-eyed Vireo on a nest.

But just around the corner a couple of miles to the east was a spot even more enchanting: Barnaby Slough. It's a broken old oxbow of the Skagit River, and now a magnificent wetland with a pleasant walking path running alongside. The view of the water is blocked by vegetation much of the way, but there are frequent openings.

There was not another soul at this site when we were there. We so enjoyed the quiet, forested surroundings and saw and heard lots of birds even though it was a hot afternoon, when birds are often napping or, at least, quiet.

Much of this wetland is owned and maintained by Seattle City Light as environmental mitigation related to its dams. Adjacent lands are owned by The Nature Conservancy and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. Seattle City Light welcomes birders to Barnaby Slough and encourages you to log their sightings to eBird. Type these coordinates into Google Maps to show the approximate location on Martin Ranch Road for the access road turnoff: 48.480082, -121.536473. Drive in and park at the large boulders and then walk into the slough, then left (to the west) along the wetland. More details can be found at A Birder's Guide to Washington, Second Edition online: https://wabirdguide.org/north-cascades-highway/

A partial list of our sightings that day at Barnaby includes: American Goldfinch, Black-headed Grosbeak, Belted Kingfisher, Common Merganser, Common Yellowthroat, Hammond's Flycatcher, Marsh Wren, Pacific-slope Flycatcher, Red-breasted Sapsucker, Red-eyed Vireo, Swainson's Thrush, Tree Swallow, Warbling Vireo, Western Tanager, and Western Wood Pewee.

Send in your bird sightings to WA Field Notes: rjm284@gmail.com

For more information about Washington Field Notes see https://wos.org/publications/field-notes/

Seen When	Send in By
March – May	June 15
June – July	August 15
August – Nov	December 15
Dec – Feb	March 15

How Bird Friendly Is Your Neighborhood?

Visit the American Bird Conservancy Bird-friendly pages:

https://abcbirds.org/get-involved/bird-friendly-life/

Important News for Conference Attendees

Reminder: Bring Proof of Your Covid-19 Vaccination to WOS Conference Registration!

The WOS conference is nearly here, after a two-year hiatus. Nearly 120 people have signed up to enjoy field trips to a diverse array of habitats: 'Shrub-steppe to meadows to peaks' as well as our programs. Registration closed June 1.

To protect the health and safety of our members and the broader community, **WOS is requiring all conference attendees to be vaccinated against COVID-19**. You will be asked to show proof of your COVID-19 vaccination when you arrive at the conference.

Information on how to get or show proof of your vaccinations is available on this web page: (https://doh.wa.gov/emergencies/covid-19). By registering, you agree that you will be fully vaccinated (2 weeks from the last vaccine dose) by June 9, 2022.

Note: The following guidelines for COVID-safe field trips will be in place for the conference:

- Stay up to date with your Covid-19 vaccine. Show proof of your vaccination when you arrive at the conference.
- Stay home if you are sick or have any symptoms.
- Carpooling is encouraged at your own risk and discretion. You may drive with others if all are vaccinated, face masks are worn, and it's mutually agreed by the riders.
- Driving on your own is not possible on every field trip due to road conditions and parking considerations. Read each field trip description carefully or contact the leader to determine if driving on your own is an option.
- Wearing a mask indoors is encouraged.

A big thank you to our conference planning team, who arranged the venue, organized the field trips and took care of a multitude of detail: Kim Thorburn, Dave Kreft, Cindy McCormack, Jon Houghton and Jennifer Kauffman.
Tracy Mitchell has been our capable registrar and has collaborated closely with the planning team, webmaster Jane Hadley and treasurer Bob Schmidt.

Lisa Hill, our conference artist, produced the artwork for our conference poster and collaborated with Elaine Chuang to produce our conference t-shirts.

We still are looking for volunteers to take conference photos and write a conference summary. Please contact president@wos.org if you can help. See you in Spokane Valley!

Jennifer Kauffman

New Bookmarks Help Promote WOS

WOS has new bookmarks to help promote membership in the organization! The bookmarks were designed by artist Lisa Hill with the help of volunteers Tanea Stephens and the WOS Board. WOS members are invited to hand out the bookmarks to friends or fellow birders who may be interested in learning more about WOS. If you're interested in helping to distribute the bookmarks, contact the board@wos.org or pick them up at the conference.

Meet Chris Rurik, New Editor of WOSNews

Greetings Washington birders. I'm Chris Rurik. I write from my home near Key Center, rural Pierce County, where I live adjacent to my great-grandfather's farm. For those whom I have not yet met in the field, I'm a writer and naturalist, husband and father, with a love not just for birds but for landscapes and human communities as well. As a birder I am drawn to underbirded places. Birding by bike has been a particular passion. And I am not immune to the county listing bug.

Nathan Daniels photo

It's an honor to be taking over WOS News. Thank you to the WOS board for entrusting me with the task. Thanks especially to Ron Post and each of the past editors, all the way back to Dennis Paulson in 1988, Issue 1, the year I was born.

In the next issue I'll write more about my vision for the newsletter's upcoming era. For now I encourage you to go to the WOS website and look through the WOS News archives. It's a treasure trove of information — all of it searchable — that will enrich your experience of birding the Evergreen State. Type in "Black Oystercatcher" or "Franklin County" and see what comes up.

Going forward I hope to produce a newsletter that is timely, concise, and packed with the lore and knowledge of WOS members. This newsletter depends upon your contributions. You can reach me anytime at editor@wos.org.

- Chris

Pine Siskin,

Ian Sutherland photo

Fox Sparrow, Larry Jordan photo

Whimbrel, Stephen R.D. Thompson photo

Washington Birds Journal: A New Direction

Jennifer Kauffman

Since 1988, WOS has published 13 issues of the *Washington Birds* journal with the help of a tremendous group of volunteer editors and contributors. While the focus of the journals is birds of Washington state and the Pacific Northwest, general interest articles have also been included.

Ed Swan, the most recent editor, resigned after Volume 13 was published in April 2021. The Board recognizes the tremendous amount of time and expertise required to compile and edit the publication, and thanks Ed (and the previous editors and contributors) for their contributions.

This Spring, the WOS Board reviewed the original intent, status, and future direction of the publication. We contacted several past editors and contributors for their ideas. The point has been made to the board that the time required for an editor to compile and edit a new volume is inordinate and should be compensated. The board is reluctant to set precedence of paying salary for a service/function in WOS that is based on long tradition of volunteer support.

One of the key items the journal has published over the years is the report of the deliberations of the Washington Bird Records Committee. Several years ago, the WBRC began publish-

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Pacific Golden-Plover amid Black-bellied Plovers, Fred Hochstaedter photo

Washington Birds: A New Direction (cont.)

ing its reports in *Western Birds*, the journal of the Western Field Ornithologists, and on the WOS web site. WBRC members noted that the rigorous peer review process of *Western Birds* has been critical to improving their reports and allows their reports to appear with similar reports from birds records committees in other western states.

The WOS board has also heard from several authors and college students that they prefer to submit unpublished scientific research articles to *Western Birds* journal, due to the rigorous peer review process and broader distribution of the finished journal. There is no doubt that WOS members and the public have enjoyed reading *Washington Birds*. The WOS Board has concluded there is an opportunity to include more scientific content and species information in the WOS newsletter, which is published more frequently and furnishes information more rapidly in smaller quantities. Our new WOSNews editor, Chris Rurik, is supportive of exploring new ways to combine the two publications.

In March 2022, the WOS board approved an advisory motion to discontinue publication of the *Washington Birds* journal. This move would require a change to the WOS bylaws and approval of the WOS membership at a future date. In the meantime, WOS welcomes your thoughts and ideas. Feel free to contact the WOS board at board@wos.org or Chris Rurik editor@wos.org with your ideas…and written articles and photos for publication in WOSNews.

Did You Know?
All 13 volumes of Washington Birds journal are available on the WOS web site, along with 197 issues of WOSNews.

Northern Pygmy Owl, Jonathan Hakim photo

WOS Welcomes These New and Returning Members

John Kooch - Bellevue
Naomi Himley - Chimacum
Mary Gropp - Eastsound
Mary Saylor - Issaquah
Lynn Henry-Sharp - Kenmore
Sharon Wada - Kirkland
Christopher Rurik - Lakebay
Diane Claussen - Olympia
Gretchen Knipshild - Redmond
Jeni & Todd Pollard - Renton
Rusty Hazzard - Sammamish
Lisa Pedersen - Seabeck
Darwin Alonso - Seattle
Heidi Asplund
& Greg Butler - Seattle
Eric Carlson - Seattle
Sheyeen Chuang - Seattle
Julia Hansbrough - Seattle
Steve Kroiss - Seattle
Scott Luchessa - Seattle
Stefany Muller - Seattle
Macfarlan Scheldt - Seattle
Katherine Steele - Seattle
Penelope Soares - Sequim
Stephanie Lambert - Spokane
Mark Selle - Spokane
Heather Rowan - Sumner
Sheryl Lamberton - Tacoma
Aiko Scales - Woodinville
Kirstin Craig & Cris Peck - Yelm
Dave Moughmer
- Trout Creek, MT

Slaty-backed Gull

Fred Hochstaedter photo

Comment Period for Snowy Plover Status Review Ends Aug. 5

Executive Summary

Derek W. Stinson, WDFW

The Pacific coast population of Snowy Plover (*Charadrius nivosus*) breeds from Grays Harbor County, Washington, south to Bahia Magdalena, Baja California, Mexico, and winters mainly in coastal areas from southern Washington to Central America. The Snowy Plover is currently state listed as endangered in Washington and a state recovery plan was completed in 1995 (Richardson 1995). The Pacific coast population of the Snowy Plover was listed as threatened by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1993, and a federal recovery plan was completed in 2007 (USFWS 2007). This document is a revision of the 1995 state recovery plan and updates the information in the 2016 status review.

Snowy Plovers have recently been consistently nesting at 3 sites in Washington, but began nesting at sites both north and south of these areas; in 2020, they nested on beaches at Connor Creek and Copalis Spit for the first time since 1984!

In 2019 the population was estimated at 93 adults; 47 were counted in 2020, but some areas were not surveyed due to restrictions on field operations during the COVID pandemic. Factors affecting productivity of Snowy Plovers in Washington include degradation of habitat by introduced beach grasses, human disturbance during the nesting period, and low productivity due to predation on eggs and chicks.

In 2013, a new predator management strategy was initiated on Washington nesting beaches that includes direct hazing and occasional removal of crows and ravens, the main nest predators. Predator management appears to have improved reproductive success in Washington and has helped facilitate recovery to the numbers specified in one of the recovery criteria for federal Recovery Unit 1 (Washington & Oregon).

Management attention to minimize human disturbance, particularly during days opened for razor clam digging, has also likely helped improve nest success and increase the Washington population.

A population viability analysis suggested that the West Coast population would not reach the objective of 3,000 individuals identified in the federal recovery plan without additional habitat restoration (Hudgens and others 2014). As a result of this need for additional plover habitat, control of beachgrass and management to reduce human disturbance are ongoing.

The 1995 Washington state recovery plan for the Snowy Plover included an objective for an "Average production of at least one fledged young per breeding pair per year". We have revised the recovery objectives to reduce the staff time needed to monitor nests to determine the number of young fledged per pair. This requirement was eliminated in favor of using the number of adults as an indicator of population levels and continued productivity. We also defined some terms used, including 'secure habitat'.

According to these revised recovery objectives, the Snowy Plover will be considered for down listing to threatened when the state supports:

1. An average of >30 adult females and >30 adult males detected during the annual breeding season surveys for at least 4 of 5 consecutive survey years prior to down-listing.
2. Three or more active nesting areas that are managed to minimize disturbance during the nesting season.
3. At least two core nesting area with secure habitat.

Although the Snowy Plover population in the region appears to be increasing as a result of management actions in Washington and Oregon, the increase in Washington seems to be due largely to recruitment of birds fledged in Oregon. The number in Washington is still small, and continued intensive management of human disturbance and predators, and habitat restoration are needed.

It is recommended that the Snowy Plover remain listed as an endangered species in Washington at this time.

Stinson, D. W. 2022. DRAFT Revised recovery plan and periodic status review for the Snowy Plover in Washington. Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Olympia, Washington. 38 + iii pp.

Let's Go Green-birding! (On Fewer Gallons)

Eugene S. Hunn

The sobering reality of global warming should inspire us to reflect upon our personal contribution to the global future. The irony of it all: We birders who love birds will drive thousands of miles each year, spewing carbon from our tailpipes, to add a few new birds to our list. Of course, I'm as bad as the next in this regard, so I'm not proposing to lay on the guilt trip, just to suggest that we might be more creative in our efforts to get to know and enjoy the birds, burning a bit less gas in the process.

First off, we need to be able to measure the ecological costs of our birding. One key factor is the "birds per gallon" ratio (BPG). In 2005, I kept track of a year's birding in Washington state. I was able to achieve a nice state year list of 312 while driving 4,851 miles, burning 205 gallons, for a BPG of 1.52. How do you calculate your BPG?

It will depend on several factors. First is the mileage you get in the vehicles you drive (or ride in), so birding in a Prius is more than 5 times as efficient as birding in a Humvee I. Hiking, biking, kayaking, and public transportation cost you nothing. (However, one might argue that flying off somewhere to go birding ought to be charged to the birder's account. I haven't figured out how that might best be calculated, but see below with respect to pelagic trips.) Next, birding together is more efficient that the solo trip, so I divide the miles traveled (and gallons burned) by the number of people traveling together. Of course, bird-pooling requires extra effort to coordinate and limits flexibility.

That's the price you pay for the enhanced BPG. I also considered the savings accrued from combining birding with other travel requirements, such as a business trip or a trip motivated as much by hiking as by birding. In such cases, I counted only the excess miles tacked on to the business trip or prorated the miles according to the fraction of the trip devoted to birding. For my two 2005 pelagic trips, I asked Phil Anderson how many gallons he burned in the Monte Carlo on a run from Westport to 125° W and back (120 gallons of diesel) divided by the number of birders on the boat (25 if full). It proved to be a not insignificant number.

One might also calculate BPG for such birding sporting events as Big Days. I once tried for 200 species in a Washington State Big Day (the record is 201)** My two-man team ended up driving 750 miles in 26 hours, recording 187 species. We were unable to locate a big diverse gull and shorebird flock on the outer beach at Ocean Shores in the fading light. At 25 mpg, that trip rated a 187/30 divided by two observers = 12.4 birds per gallon.

Last year,** I tried a Big Foot Day in Seattle (cheating by taking the bus from Ballard to the U district), recording 91 species on zero gallons for a BPG of Infinity! Can't hardly beat that. (Of course, I

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Let's Go Green-birding! (continued)

failed to count the miles I drove to get to and from the route - only 28 miles or a single gallon in this case, so the actual BPG was about 90, still nearly eight times as efficient as my failed attempt at the State Big Day record.) One might also focus one's birding closer to home.

The growing popularity of county listing (unless you're trying to see as many birds as possible in all 39 counties) may upgrade our collective BPG statistics. However, after a year or two trying to keep pace with Matt Bartels in King County, I find that I can drive nearly as far chasing King County year birds as I would were my target a big state year list. Nevertheless, county listing has reduced my total birding mileage somewhat, with no loss of excitement of the chase.

One final note: A bit of planning goes a long way. One could design a Green Big Year by plotting a series of trips designed to maximize bird diversity while minimizing BPG.

I have calculated that it should be possible to see 340 species in Washington state in one year in less than 6,000 miles (ca. 240 gallons @ 25 mpg), which could readily be cut in half by ride sharing. Trips might be organized to incorporate a mix of highly diverse sites and some might include a hiking or biking component, and of course, as with respect to saving hot water, "shower with a friend."

One could maximize one's BPG by staying home and counting chickadees at the feeder. Obviously, maximizing BPG is not the ideal solution. Rather than birding less, let's bird as much or more, but with one eye on the gas gauge.

***Editor's note*: This article is reprinted from WOS-News No. 113, Feb.-March, 2008. Since that time the Big Day record for Washington of 208 species was set May 16, 2011, by a team: Ryan Merrill, Ryan Shaw, Michael Woodruff, and Charlie Wright.

Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Lee Jaffe photo