

**RIVERS & MOUNTAINS OF
OREGON & WASHINGTON:
AN INTRODUCTORY BIRDING TOUR**

MAY 16–23, 2015

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By Bob Sundstrom

Three downy owlets peered at their surroundings from atop a nest some 40 feet up in a large conifer. It's a young brood of Great Gray Owls, about half grown, looking for their next meal. Not more than a hundred feet away, the owlets' mother perches on a branch near the trunk of another tall evergreen, her body close to the trunk and all but invisible due to its cryptic gray feathering patterned just like the tree's bark. As she gazes back and forth, her piercing yellow eyes contrast with her dark face. She glides through the nearby trunks, ultimately returning to the nest. Nearby, a Black-backed Woodpecker calls, then drums atop a snag. It's a male, and its golden forecrown glints against its black crown feathers. Flocks of Red Crossbills call overhead, as the birds bound from tree to tree, adults and lots of recent fledglings. Viewed in the scope, the crossed bill tips are dramatic. Three species of nuthatches are calling simultaneously, at one point all perched in the same tree. A Williamson's Sapsucker drums a triple roll of notes, then flies in. Now there's a pair, the two so unlike in appearance they were once thought separate species.

This scene recounts a sequence of events over a couple of hours on our Rivers & Mountains of Oregon & Washington tour in mid-May 2015. Our group was in the Blue Mountains of Oregon on a pleasant morning, the open forest floor bright with wildflowers. Not long after this sequence, as we got our first good looks at gorgeous Townsend's Warblers, a tiny Northern Pygmy-Owl flew in, keeping the group busy at the spotting scope for quite a while.

Two days later we crossed spectacular high elevation grasslands in north-central Oregon. Here we had the good fortune to see another owl species. A pair of Short-eared Owls flew moth-like across a broad expanse of grass, the male in courtship display as it clapped its long wings briskly under its torso in flight, making a series of sharp snaps. Our good fortune held with two shy and much anticipated gallinaceous birds too, as we saw a pair each of Chukar and Gray Partridge.

The weeklong Rivers & Mountains of Oregon & Washington tour begins in Portland, Oregon, then runs east along the Columbia River Gorge, whose towering cliffs and tree-clad borders put it among the most scenic places in the United States. By the first afternoon, we had turned north from the river toward towering Mt. Adams in the South Cascades, where we spent two nights at Mt. Adams Lodge. The comfortable lodge sits at the foot of 12,281 ft. Mt. Adams on many acres of forested grounds, and with breathtaking views of the snow-covered peak. Leaving Mt. Adams Lodge after two nights, the route runs along the scenic Klickitat River Canyon and then east along the Columbia Gorge. From the Columbia we departed southeast, across the grasslands just noted, and back among forested slopes and along the Grande Ronde River to La Grande, Oregon at the foot of the Blue Mountains. The Blue Mountains are enough reason to head for La Grande, but there is also an extensive, protected marsh just south of town, where we saw nesting Sandhill Cranes with young orange chicks, American Avocets, Wilson's and Red-necked phalaropes, American White Pelican, loads of Cinnamon Teal, Virginia Rail and Sora, legions of Yellow-headed Blackbirds, and much more.

The tour traverses a remarkable diversity of beautiful natural landscapes: the river gorges, the broad meadows backed by stands of conifers, the high grasslands with rocky outcrops, the lovely oak-clad Klickitat River Canyon, rivers running through pines and firs, and marshes alive with waterfowl and other birds.

Our time at Mt. Adams Lodge was splendid. The seed feeders brought in Cassin's Finches, Black-headed Grosbeaks, and Pine Siskins. Hummingbird feeders pulled in Calliope, Black-chinned, and Rufous hummers, all at close range. A Red-breasted Sapsucker frequented sap wells on a birch tree, the same tree from which the seed feeders were hung. A short walk on the lodge grounds quickly led to an impressive list of warblers, flycatchers, and vireos. The lodge rooms were comfortable, the food excellent, the atmosphere relaxed. It was just a short drive from the lodge to find White-headed Woodpecker and Gray Flycatcher, a bit longer to Klickitat Canyon where Lazuli Buntings sang at every stop, and a Lewis's Woodpecker posed beautifully.

We saw a remarkable ten species of woodpeckers during the tour. Ten warblers included Hermit, Black-throated Gray, and MacGillivray's. And spring singing was at its peak, birds' voices sounding forth nonstop. But of all the singing birds seen on the tour, it was one of the smallest—a tiny Pacific Wren—that offered up the longest and most complex song.

May 16: Arrivals in Portland and get-acquainted dinner at Sheraton. Night at Hampton Inn.

May 17: After breakfast at hotel drove across border into Washington, with first birding at Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge. Mid-morning, driving east along the Columbia River on the Washington side, making birding stops at Beacon Rock State Park (picnic lunch here) and Little White Salmon fish hatchery. Continued east, visiting the, then north via Hwy. 141 and B-Z Corners Rd. to Glenwood and Mt. Adams Lodge. Late afternoon watched seed and hummingbird feeders and walked trail to old airstrip area. First of two dinners and nights at Mt. Adams Lodge.

May 18: Optional outing before breakfast on trails through the wooded grounds of Mt. Adams Lodge. After breakfast, birded ponderosa pine habitat near Glenwood, then mid-morning drove Glenwood-Goldendale Rd. along upper Klickitat River gorge, birding stops enroute. Picnicked at Leidl Campground, drove to just north of junction of Hwy. 142, then returned back along upper canyon to Mt. Adams Lodge. After dinner at lodge, drove along roads south of Glenwood and along Conboy National Wildlife Refuge, looking for elk and cranes.

May 19: Departed Mt. Adams Lodge after breakfast along Glenwood-Goldendale Rd., then along lower Klickitat River gorge on Hwy. 142. Lunch at café in Lyle, then south on Hwy. 97 and across Columbia River into Oregon. Continued east on I-84 all the way to La Grande. After break at hotel, late afternoon visit to Ladd Marsh. Dinner at Ten Depot St.; first of three nights in at Best Western La Grande.

May 20: After breakfast at the motel, birded some of Spring Creek area of Wallowa-Whitman National Forest to bird until late morning. Lunch at Raul's Taqueria in La Grande. After break at hotel, drove south to bird La Grande treatment ponds and Ladd Marsh Wildlife Area wetlands. Dinner at Benchmark.

May 21: Following breakfast at hotel, drove out along Grande Ronde River (Hwy. 244 and FR 51). Walked trail through riparian area at Bird Track Springs. Drove up side road from FR 51 to about 4800' in Blue Mts., where picnicked before returning downhill and then back to hotel. Break at hotel, then late afternoon visit to Foothills Rd. and Ladd Marsh. Dinner at Mamacita's.

May 22: After breakfast, departed La Grande along Grande Ronde River, with stop at Battle Mountain Summit rest area. Continued west on 244 to Ukiah, then north and west through grasslands and farms along 395 and 74. Found Short-eared Owl pair just a mile or two north of Ukiah. Lunch at cafe in Heppner. North to Columbia River, then west on I-84 to Portland. Dinner at Sheraton and night at Hampton Inn.

May 23: Departures.

BIRDS [*italics* for uncommon sightings; ***bold italics*** for rarities]

GEESE, SWANS & DUCKS:

Greater White-fronted Goose – The five with non-migratory Canada Geese near Glenwood were a surprise, as this species normally migrates to the Arctic in spring by mid-May to breed

Canada Goose – resident pairs, some with goslings (Great Basin form of species)

Wood Duck – at several spots, including a pair on a high tree limb at Ridgefield

Gadwall – pairs were fairly common near La Grande

American Wigeon – just one, seen briefly in a roadside pond

Mallard – common, some females with tiny ducklings in tow

Blue-winged Teal – just one drake, at Ladd Marsh

Cinnamon Teal – quite a few pairs around Ladd Marsh; handsome drakes

Northern Shoveler – also at Ladd Marsh, including a couple of drakes in the roadway

Northern Pintail – a single drake at Ladd Marsh

Redhead – lovely pairs at Ladd Marsh and treatment ponds

Ring-necked Duck – nice view of several on woodland pond near Glenwood

Bufflehead – a fairly rare and local breeder in Oregon, we saw four in a small pond near Grande Ronde R.

Hooded Merganser – a hen with at least three ducklings near Grande Ronde River

Common Merganser – great views near Little White Salmon hatchery

Ruddy Duck – lots of ruddy-flanked males near La Grande

GALLINACEOUS BIRDS:

California Quail – a pair or two at Mt. Adams Lodge, and others (including sentry males on high perches) along Klickitat R. and near La Grande

Chukar – Just when it looked like this secretive species had eluded us, a second look just east of Heppner turned up a pair foraging in a newly-planted field.

Gray Partridge – a pair near a corral in the Oregon grasslands

Ring-necked Pheasant – seemed to be fairly common in the grassy fields at or near Ladd Marsh

Ruffed Grouse – heard drumming at Bird Track Springs along Grande Ronde R.

Wild Turkey – just two, one in oaks along White Salmon R. drive and another east of Glenwood

GREBES:

Pied-billed Grebe – heard at two locations

Eared Grebe – scoped in breeding plumage at La Grande treatment ponds

Western Grebe – three at a lake on Ladd Marsh preserve, whose white plumage stood out at long distance

PELICANS:

American White Pelican – at Ladd Marsh, a group of eleven roosting on the edge of a shallow lake

CORMORANTS:

Double-crested Cormorant – flying over Ladd Marsh

BITTERNS & HERONS:

American Bittern – heard making their deep pumping sounds at Ladd Marsh

Great Blue Heron – a few at widespread locales

Great Egret – at Ridgefield and Ladd Marsh, just a few

IBISES:

White-faced Ibis – foraging in tall marsh vegetation at Ladd Marsh

AMERICAN VULTURES

Turkey Vulture – widespread in small numbers

EAGLES, HAWKS & ALLIES:

Osprey – especially prevalent along the Columbia River, where quite a few nests seen

Bald Eagle – very close view of adult flying overhead at Ridgefield; one especially scenic view of an eagle standing in the Klickitat River, then flying along the river

Northern Harrier – seen most days of the tour, especially conspicuous at Ladd Marsh

Cooper's Hawk – one adult in flight over Klickitat Canyon

Swainson's Hawk – fairly common south of La Grande, where dark and light morphs seen; also over grasslands between Ukiah and Heppner

Red-tailed Hawk – ubiquitous, including a couple dark morphs

RAILS & COOTS:

Virginia Rail – after hearing several at close range, we saw one very well while using the van as a blind

Sora – excellent views, on a woodland pond near Glenwood and at Ladd Marsh

American Coot – numerous at Ladd Marsh

CRANES:

Sandhill Crane – Great experiences with cranes: a pair calling and dancing (the male, mostly) at Conboy refuge; and pairs near the road at Ladd Marsh, including one with two orange chicks about a foot tall.

PLOVERS, SANDPIPERS & ALLIES:

Killdeer

Black-necked Stilt – Ladd Marsh

American Avocet – two in same pond with stilt at Ladd Marsh

Spotted Sandpiper – especially evident along Grande Ronde's rapidly flowing waters

Wilson's Snipe – Susan spotted one on a fence post right next to the road

Wilson's Phalarope – beautiful females and drab males at La Grande treatment ponds

GULLS, & TERNS:

Franklin's Gull – five flew in to La Grande treatment ponds as we stood scoping waterfowl

Ring-billed Gull – at a rest area in Oregon along the Columbia

California Gull – the most prevalent gull seen along the Columbia

PIGEONS & DOVES:

Rock Pigeon

Eurasian Collared-Dove – ever more common in the regions

Mourning Dove

OWLS:

Northern Pygmy-Owl – first time for this tour, we enjoyed scope views of the tiny owl at Spring Ck. area, as it dodged the mobbing attacks of robins, warblers, and other small birds

Great Gray Owl – One of the clear highlights of the tour. We scoped a female as she posed on a branch not far from her active nest platform. On the platform were three half-grown owlets, which at times raised their heads and breasts for a clear view. The female flew from her perch, probably hunting, and returned to sit with the young for quite a while.

Short-eared Owl – A surprise, as a bird seen only once before on the tour. We watched a pair on the grasslands north of Ukiah, flying over the expansive fields and sometimes crouching on the ground, all but invisible. One of the owls performed wing-claps under its body, several times, a behavior typical of males during courtship.

SWIFTS:

Vaux's Swift – first seen in Ridgefield early in the morning, these small swifts were also a regular sight along the Klickitat

HUMMINGBIRDS:

Black-chinned Hummingbird – a male visited the Mt. Adams Lodge feeders

Anna's Hummingbird – one in Ridgefield, the first morning

Calliope Hummingbird – males with gorgets of purple ribbons, as well as females at Lodge feeders; also a male at Bird Track Springs

Rufous Hummingbird – females at Mt. Adams Lodge, a male at a feeder in Washington

KINGFISHERS:

Belted Kingfisher – showed up late in the tour when Deborah spotted a pair along Grande Ronde R.; a pair seen mating the following day

WOODPECKERS & ALLIES:

Lewis's Woodpecker – great views of this lovely woodpecker along Klickitat Canyon

Red-naped Sapsucker – scoped at Bird Track Springs, high in a huge cottonwood

Red-breasted Sapsucker – First seen at Ridgefield refuge, then many wonderful views of a pair feeding on a sap tree (a birch) from which the seed feeders were hung at Mt. Adams Lodge.

Williamson's Sapsucker – seen both at Spring Ck. and Starkey Experimental Forest, males and females

Downy Woodpecker – a few

Hairy Woodpecker – seen especially well right in Glenwood and at Mt. Adams Lodge suet feeder

White-headed Woodpecker – First views were of a male in the pine forest near Glenwood, as it drummed atop a tree. Later, one turned up at the suet feeder at Mt. Adams Lodge, seen again right as we loaded up the van to depart.

Black-backed Woodpecker – Often elusive and shy, we had good scope views at Spring Ck. of a male with golden forecrown.

Northern Flicker – of the red-shafted form

Pileated Woodpecker – the two the flew in as we were watching a Red-naped Sapsucker were the final woodpecker species seen on the tour, bringing the total to ten species

FALCONS:

American Kestrel – some fine views of this beautiful, small falcon

Prairie Falcon – one in the grasslands northwest of Ukiah, seen flying and scoped on a distant utility pole

FLYCATCHERS & ALLIES:

Olive-sided Flycatcher – singing and perching atop the trees at Mt. Adams Lodge

Western Wood-Pewee – seen primarily at Mt. Adams Lodge

Hammond's Flycatcher – singing, calling and perching in the canopy at Lodge and in Glenwood pines

Dusky Flycatcher – nice views of diagnostically singing birds at Lodge and Bird Track Springs

Gray Flycatcher – scoped in the pines near Glenwood; and in oaks where found Ash-throated Flycatcher

Pacific-slope Flycatcher – heard at Ridgefield refuge, along the woodland trail

Say's Phoebe – just one, at wooden structure in the Oregon grasslands

Ash-throated Flycatcher – good views of a pair in the oak/pine woodlands east of Glenwood

Western Kingbird – seen daily in the drier parts of the two states

Eastern Kingbird – one at a riparian marsh along the Grande Ronde

VIREOS:

Cassin's Vireo – close views on the afternoon walk behind Mt. Adams Lodge

Warbling Vireo – widespread, its plain visage seen well along Klickitat and Bird Track Springs

JAYS, MAGPIES & CROWS:

Gray Jay – flying across the road west of Battle Mt. Summit, seen well only by Bob

Steller's Jay – seen a few times most days of the tour

Western Scrub-Jay – this pale blue, crest-less jay was especially prevalent at Ridgefield and along Klickitat, generally in the oaks

Clark's Nutcracker – heard several places at Spring Ck., scoped in highlands above Grande Ronde

Black-billed Magpie – in the dry interior
American Crow
Common Raven

LARKS:

Horned Lark – nice view of a male with “horns” raised, in grasslands beyond Ukiah

SWALLOWS & MARTINS:

Purple Martin – uncommon and local in Pacific Northwest, especially inland, where we saw several at a nest box at Steigerwald refuge east of Longview, Washington

Tree Swallow – many seen, often at nest boxes

Violet-green Swallow – showing mostly white rumps and vivid green backs (on males)

Northern Rough-winged Swallow – several small groups near stream bank nest cavities

Bank Swallow – a few at La Grande treatment ponds

Cliff Swallow – at a farmyard puddle, hovering at the ground with tails raised while gathering beakfuls of mud for nests; also at nest on a basalt cliff, and at several road underpasses

Barn Swallow

TITMICE through CREEPERS:

Black-capped Chickadee

Mountain Chickadee – the hoarse-voiced chickadees of the interior conifer woodlands

Chestnut-backed Chickadee – nice view of one that flew in alongside a MacGillivray’s Warbler, at Beacon Rock State Park

Bushtit – close views of a pair at Ridgefield refuge

Red-breasted Nuthatch – strong responder to pygmy-owl imitations in interior conifer woodlands

White-breasted Nuthatch – one of the trio of nuthatch species seen in the same tree at Spring Ck.

Pygmy Nuthatch – close views of rapidly peeping nuthatches in Glenwood Pines and at Spring Ck.

Brown Creeper – great study of one working trunks at Ridgefield refuge

WRENS & DIPPERS:

Rock Wren – atop rock features in the Oregon grasslands

House Wren – especially songful and visible at Mt. Adams Lodge

Pacific Wren – good, close view of a singing bird at Ridgefield

Marsh Wren – two wrens sang back and forth and perched on cattails at Ladd Marsh

Bewick's Wren – singing atop a bramble patch at Ridgefield

American Dipper – Laura and Deborah spotted the elusive bird at the Little White Salmon hatchery

KINGLETS:

Golden-crowned Kinglet – male flashing its fiery orange mohawk, in conifer forest above Grande Ronde

Ruby-crowned Kinglet – singing males near our picnic spot in larch forest above Grande Ronde

THRUSHES & ALLIES:

Western Bluebird – nice views at several spots on several days of tour

Mountain Bluebird – one male seen flashing away from the road

Swainson's Thrush – calling at Ridgefield, and one hopping on the ground at Beacon Rock St. Pk.

Hermit Thrush – singing, seen briefly

American Robin – ubiquitous in wooded areas, many singing their lovely, relaxed songs

STARLINGS & ALLIES:

European Starling

WAXWINGS:

Cedar Waxwing – seen nicely along the lower Klickitat; migrants just beginning to arrive

WOOD WARBLERS

Orange-crowned Warbler – excellent view at Ridgefield; heard singing at a variety of spots

Nashville Warbler – nice views both south and east of Glenwood; many others heard

MacGillivray's Warbler – heard many places, seen well at Beacon Rock St. Pk.

Common Yellowthroat – good views at Ridgefield and Ladd Marsh

Yellow Warbler – singing many riparian areas, seen well at Mt. Adams Lodge
Yellow-rumped Warbler – in the tall conifers, the “Audubon’s” form of the species
Black-throated Gray Warbler – very good views, at Beacon Rock St. Pk. and among the Klickitat oaks
Townsend's Warbler – in the tall conifers of Spring Ck. and above the Grande Ronde
Hermit Warbler – in the tall firs at Beacon Rock St. Pk., all yellow head with black throat
Wilson's Warbler – nicely observed at eye level at Ridgefield

SPARROWS & ALLIES:

Spotted Towhee – Pacific Slope and interior subspecies seen
Chipping Sparrow – trilling and trilling in the Ponderosa pines
Vesper Sparrow – scoped while singing (Starkey Experimental Forest)
Lark Sparrow – good roadside and in the road views, including one pair mating
Savannah Sparrow
Grasshopper Sparrow – heard singing in the grasslands beyond Ukiah
Song Sparrow – we saw heavily marked *morphna* on the Pacific lowlands in the west and lightly marked *merrilli* in the interior
White-crowned Sparrow – the *pugetensis* subspecies in western Washington/Oregon, which some authorities believe is a unique species
Golden-crowned Sparrow – A sort of bonus bird. The breeding plumage adult at Mt. Adams Lodge was both a bit of a laggard migrant, since most have flown north to breed by late May, and in an interior site where uncommon even in winter. A first for the tour.
Dark-eyed Junco – the “Oregon” form, *oreganus* subspecies

GROSBEAKS, BUNTINGS & ALLIES:

Western Tanager – heard more than seen, but some nice views of males close to the van
Black-headed Grosbeak – singing nonstop in a variety of places, great views of males at Mt. Adams Lodge
seed feeder
Lazuli Bunting – gorgeous, scintillating males; and one female perched atop a tall, bare treetop

BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES:

Red-winged Blackbird – ubiquitous in damp places during the tour
Western Meadowlark – belting out very loud, liquid songs
Yellow-headed Blackbird – Suzy’s very iconic bird
Brewer's Blackbird – the most grackle-looking of Northwest birds
Brown-headed Cowbird
Bullock’s Oriole – a couple of very nice views, especially along lower Klickitat River

FINCHES:

House Finch – singing near Ladd Marsh
Purple Finch – singing atop trees at Ridgefield and Beacon Rock State Park
Cassin's Finch – seen best at Lodge seed feeder; also in trees at Lodge and outside La Grande
Red Crossbill – Terrific views, scoped to see the crossed bill tips, both at Spring Ck. and in high elevation conifers above Grande Ronde R. One flock in larches numbered roughly 50 birds.
Pine Siskin – seen very well at Lodge seed feeder
Lesser Goldfinch – brief view along roadside on Klickitat Canyon
American Goldfinch – golden yellow males
Evening Grosbeak – scarcer than usual, seen south of Glenwood in trees near White Salmon River

OLD WORLD SPARROWS:

House Sparrow

MAMMALS, HERPS & OTHER VERTEBRATES:

Eastern Gray Squirrel – non-native to area, at Ridgefield
Douglas’ Squirrel
Red Squirrel
Yellow Pine Chipmunk

California Ground Squirrel – often near the roadside throughout the Klickitat area
Columbian Ground Squirrel – the rufous faced squirrels in the highway cloverleaf in La Grande
Washington Ground Squirrel – tiny, short-tailed ground squirrels seen in the NE Oregon grasslands
Yellow-bellied Marmot – a couple in farmland along Grande Ronde River
Common Muskrat – swimming intently at Ladd Marsh
Eastern Cottontail – non-native, at Ridgefield
Coyote – two sightings along Klickitat
Mule Deer – both the “Black-tailed” form and the typical interior form
Elk – several along roadside near Grande Ronde River
Pronghorn – one in the grasslands west Ukiah
Western Fence Lizard
Slider
Painted Turtle
Bullfrog
Pacific Chorus Frog – heard