

Windows to Wildlife



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In This Issue . . .

- Early Birds!* Page 1
- Early Birds continued* Page 2
- Feeder Favorites* Page 2
- Grizzly Bear Delisting* Page 3
- Winter on the Moon* Page 4
- Thank You* Page 5
- Events* Page 6

The Idaho Watchable Wildlife Committee is comprised of the following agencies and organizations:

- U.S. Bureau of Land Management
- U.S. Forest Service
- Idaho Department of Parks & Recreation
- Idaho Audubon Council
- U.S. Bureau of Reclamation
- Idaho Department of Commerce
- Idaho Department of Transportation
- U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
- Idaho Department of Fish and Game

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Early Birds!

Trish Nixon, Raptor Specialist, The Peregrine Fund's World Center for Birds of Prey, Boise, Idaho

Bird watchers wait for spring with great anticipation. We look forward to the warming days and the songs of our favorite backyard birds, signaling their return from migration and hinting that nesting season is just around the corner. Sunny spring days, greening grasses and budding trees are synonymous with nesting and chicks. But did you know that as the chilly winds and intermittent snows of February and March keep spring at bay, many members of the bird of prey family are preparing to nest, and some are already incubating eggs? Many of us are still holed up next to our fireplaces, dreaming of 'no-jacket' weather while raptors are renewing their pair bonds and preparing nests for a new brood. An observant bird watcher (appropriately bundled up and equipped with a thermos of hot chocolate and good binoculars) can be privy to these early nesting behaviors if they know what to look for and where to look.

"Early-bird" usually refers to robins out foraging for worms at the crack of dawn, but in this instance, I'm referring to the Great-Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*). This large raptor of the night is a very early nester and can often be seen incubating eggs on brisk February days, their backs and heads dusted with snow. Great-Horned Owls are one of the most voracious members of the raptor family, very adaptable, and quite hardy. By nesting in winter, this bird gets a head-start on the season, and is also able to avoid having to build a nest. Instead of constructing their own nest, Great-Horned Owls make use of the nest of a hawk or another large bird such as a blue heron. They may add a few sticks or branches to the structure to perfect it, but by and large, the nest building process is greatly abbreviated for this owl. As harsh as incubating chicks in February may seem, it does come with certain advantages. With March arrives warmer temperatures and an abundance of prey. Thus, feeding ravenous owlets is a bit easier. By the time other birds of all types are nesting in greater numbers, the early-hatched Great-Horned Owl chicks are fledged, flying about on their own. Indeed, some of the newly hatched young of other birds will comprise part of the menu for Great-Horned Owls, but it's all part nature's system of checks and balances. Keep your eyes open for this large nocturnal predator in February, and if you are fortunate enough, you may spot their nests and the fuzzy nestlings within, high in trees with access to fields and open country where prey is easy to hunt.

continued on next page

EARLY BIRDS CONTINUED

continued from page 1

While humans are thinking hearts, flowers and chocolates for Valentine's Day, birds are catching up on their own courting rituals. Aerial courtship displays are the most noticeable and fascinating to watch. The Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), begins courtship behavior in February. The behaviors include stick passing, in which the mature birds pass sticks between one another to indicate an interest in nesting and mating. I've witnessed Golden Eagles high above canyons along the Snake River passing sticks to one another in flight; a breathtaking site! Courting 'sky dances' are another behavior easily seen and recognized when watching Golden Eagles. The dances consist of spectacular vertical dives, spirals, and upward swoops through which the male eagle announces to the female that he's interested and available. Males will also perform similar aerobatics when defending their territory. By the time March rolls around, Golden Eagle pairs have finished the courting duties are ready to begin mating season and egg laying. Look for them along the steep walls of canyons during these months and throughout the early summer as the business of chick rearing occupies their time and attention.

The Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) is another of our North American raptor varieties that may be observed during the colder months, beginning the process of bonding, nest building and egg

laying. Courting behavior may begin in December for non-migrating Osprey, with most of the rituals centering on food and nest sites. The male Osprey also performs conspicuous aerial displays near the nest site, urging the female to join him and begin the process of either rejuvenating their existing nest, or building a new one. Osprey nests are rather large, and always well situated near water, as this bird's diet is comprised almost entirely of fish. Though both genders collect materials, the female does most of the placement of those materials in the nest. The outside of the nest is constructed mainly of sticks, while the inside is lined with grasses, seaweed, kelp, cardboard, fishing line, plastic bags, and anything else the birds find and can incorporate into the structure.

As you can see, a wide variety of birds are quite busy during the winter. Those last few weeks of cold weather can actually be a wonderful time to get outside and burn off some of those winter holiday calories, searching the skies, trees, and cliffs for tell-tale signs of the never ending process of renewal in the avian world! You'll find that you are very often able to enjoy the sights, sounds, and scents of nature more readily in the colder months, with less traffic on trails and in the field. Late winter is one of the best times to bird.

Feeder Favorites—Feathered Irruptions

Vicki Runnoe, Salmon Region Conservation Educator, IDFG

One of the joys of feeding birds is the ever present possibility of seeing something new or surprising. An ordinary morning becomes extraordinary with the arrival of a bird you have never seen before. You rush to grab binoculars and a field guide and bask in the glow of a new identification. Or perhaps you glance out at your feeders and are shocked to find them covered with birds, birds that only yesterday numbered just a few. One winter you may host a wide variety of species while the next finds you wondering where they went.

Such vagaries in your feeding seasons are usually the result of what is referred to as an "irruption." Not to be confused with an "eruption," and its volcanic connotation, an "irruption" is defined by ornithologists with the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology as "a migratory movement that is irregular in time and space, depending upon factors other than a change of seasons." In general, irruptions are related to changes in the abundance of food sources, mainly from plants.

Changes in food abundance can be part of some plant species' normal boom and bust cycle (mast cycles). A year or two of heavy seed, cone, or bud production is followed by moderate to low production in other years. Food availability can also be affected by



Clark's nutcracker
Photo courtesy Albert P. Beker
@California Academy of Science

unusual events such as large-scale forest fires or prolonged droughts. For bird species that depend upon plants for winter food, flexible migratory patterns through the winter increases the chance for survival.

Winter irruptions move birds out of their typical winter ranges and into regions where they are not usually found. Interestingly, irruptive movement tends to be in eastward or westward directions as opposed to north or south. Depending upon the species, geographic movement may be limited with birds traveling a relatively short distance. Examples of a short-distance irruption could include the movement of Clark's Nutcrackers from their usual mountain habitat into lower elevation communities. But when food crop failure is widespread, some species will undertake flights ranging over hundreds of miles in search of food. One such "superflight" occurred during the winter of 1997-98 when five species of winter finches invaded the northeastern United States, much to

the delight of feederwatchers. A superflight of a different sort made national headlines last winter as Great Gray and Boreal Owls invaded the upper Midwest, particularly Minnesota and northern Wisconsin.

Irruptions of seed-feeding birds seem to occur regularly, mirroring the mast cycles of many important plant species. Data

continued on page 5

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Grizzly sow and cub

Is it Time to Delist the Yellowstone Grizzly?

Lauri Hanauska-Brown, IDFG, nongame biologist
in the Upper Snake Region

On November 15, 2005, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced that the Yellowstone grizzly bear population is recovered and no longer meets the Endangered Species Act's definition of threatened. The Yellowstone grizzly population was listed as threatened in 1975 when the population estimates were less than 200. Today's population estimates are as high as 600 bears. The population has steadily increased at 4 to 7 percent per year and has expanded well outside of Yellowstone National Park. The population has met all of the recovery criteria necessary for delisting.

Cooperation among federal and state agencies has been instrumental to the recovery of the Yellowstone grizzly population. The state and federal agencies' agreement to implement an ecosystem-wide Conservation Strategy along with state management plans will ensure that adequate regulatory mechanisms remain in place. The Idaho state management plan seeks to; 1) ensure the long-term viability of grizzly bears, 2) support expansion of grizzly bears into areas that are biologically suitable and socially acceptable, and 3) manage grizzly bears as a game animal. Grizzly bears will be managed by means similar to how the Idaho Department of Fish and Game currently manages black bears and mountain lions; with established guidelines and mortality limits developed for the ecosystem.

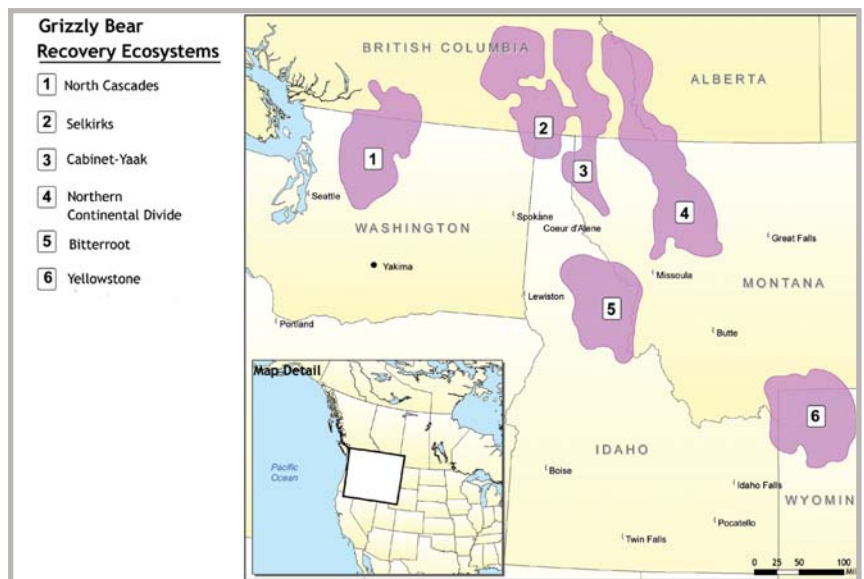
Grizzly bears currently occupy much of southeastern Idaho, including the Island Park, Ashton, and Teton Valley areas. Most bears are found on Federal lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service where regulations on road densities, ATV use, and food storage

have improved habitat for the bears. During this past summer however, a number of bears were observed on private property. Some bears became accustomed to people and found easy living in areas of high human use and food availability. Garbage, bird seed, pet food, and even apples trees are attractants for both black and grizzly bears. Bears that obtain human foods tend to stick around until they get into more serious trouble. The Department trapped and moved two bears this past summer that obtained garbage, bird seed, and apples. Bears that become conditioned to human foods may also lose their fear of humans and can get defensive of what they consider to be 'theirs'. Grizzly bears can also kill livestock. The Department captured and moved a third bear this summer after the bear injured and killed some cattle. So far, these relocated bears have not gotten into further trouble, but the temptation of easy food sources can be difficult to resist.

Grizzly bears are opportunistic omnivores, which means they eat predominantly vegetation, bulbs and tubers, whitebark pine nuts, and berries. Their diet may also include fish, carcasses, insects and anything else they can find. The public's most important role in the future management of grizzly bears is to keep human food sources out of reach whether it is on a camping trip or in the backyard. Preventing the food conditioning of bears is a good idea for both bears and humans. Please assist the Department by reporting grizzly bear observations and by keeping a clean camp and a clean yard!

You can read more about Yellowstone grizzlies, the delisting process, and the Idaho state plan at <http://mountain-prairie.fws.gov/species/mammals/grizzly/2yellowstone.htm>. The public has until February 15 to comment on the delisting proposal. Send comments to: Grizzly Bear Recovery Coordinator, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, University Hall 309, University of Montana, Missoula, Montana 59812 or by e-mail to FW6_grizzly_yellowstone@fws.gov.

The Yellowstone grizzly population (#6) is proposed for delisting



Map courtesy of Brent Thomas, IDFG

Winter on the Moon

Ted Stout - NPS, Chief of Interpretation at Craters of the Moon

Back by popular demand, Craters of the Moon will be offering free Winter Ecology Workshops to the general public again this winter. Workshops will be available Jan. 14, 21, 28 and Feb. 11 and 18. In previous winters, these workshops have filled very quickly. Therefore, we suggest you call EARLY to make a reservation. Contact Craters at (208) 527-3257 for a reservation or for more information. Craters will provide snowshoes for workshop participants who do not own them. Information on what to wear and what to bring will be mailed upon making a reservation.

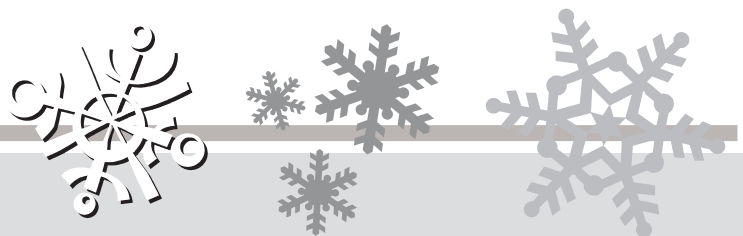
The general public workshops consist of both classroom and field sessions. The workshop begins with a one hour classroom presentation, which will provide a general introduction to the winter season. Topics include: “Why do we have winter?”; the different kinds of “Nivean” or snow-world environments; the characteristics and properties of snow; and the processes that act on snow. Animal and plant coping mechanisms, strategies, behaviors, and survival adaptations to winter will also be discussed. Winter health and safety issues, such as avalanches and hypothermia, are also presented.

The field portion is conducted on snowshoes and covers 3-5 miles. Lunch is eaten out in the field. Please be prepared to sit in the snow. Tracks and trails are usually abundant and



©Ted Stout

participants will learn to identify the animals that made them. The stark contrast between the black basalt and the white snow makes the snowshoe excursion a unique experience in comparison to most other snowshoe areas in Idaho. Participants learn to identify plants in their winter garb and are also introduced to the geology of the park.



Sewing the Seeds of Love

Do you love birds? Can you sew? We need you! The Idaho Bird Observatory needs *bird bags*. Bird bags are small cloth bags used in bird banding. First, birds are safely caught in nets. Bird banders quickly remove the birds from nets and place them in bird bags for a few minutes to calm the birds. A small, light weight band is placed on the leg of the bird after the bird is weighed, sex and age is determined and species is identified. Then the bird is released.

The Idaho Bird Observatory participates in a global bird banding program, M.A.P.S. This program helps monitor bird populations around the world. Since birds are “indicator species” (animals that are very sensitive to environmental changes), knowledge gained from banding birds can help not only birds, but humans alike!

Call or write to the contact below for a bird bag pattern and fabric requirements. This is a great winter project that will benefit springtime bird banding operations. This can be a great project for kids, too, since the sewing is fairly simple.

Sara Focht, Idaho Fish and Game (208)287-2750 or sfocht@idfg.idaho.gov



Photo courtesy Idaho Bird Observatory

THANK YOU

Our sincere thanks go to all supporters of the Nongame Program, financially or otherwise. Without your contributions, the Nongame Program could not conduct critical research, hold wildlife viewing events, or publish this newsletter. The following people made direct donations, purchased or renewed a wildlife license plate, or let us know of their tax checkoff donation. These lists represent only newsletter subscribers who have returned a subscription form between September 1 — December 1, 2005, and marked the contributor box. Many subscribers not listed here have contributed generously and Idaho's nongame wildlife thanks all of you.

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Continued from page 2

gathered from Cornell's Project FeederWatch shows that an interval of two to three years between irruptions is not uncommon in species such as Red-breasted Nuthatches and Common Redpolls.

The group of birds most often associated with mass irruptions is referred to as the "winter finches." This group includes Pine Grosbeaks, Red Crossbills, White-winged Crossbills, Pine Siskins, Common Redpolls, and Evening Grosbeaks. During winters of low food availability, these species can spread all over our state and beyond in search of food. Birds such as Pine Grosbeaks and Red Crossbills that are irregularly distributed across Idaho may suddenly seem common as they concentrate in areas where they find food.



Pine siskin ©Joyce Gross

Finches are certainly not the only irruptive species. Red-breasted Nuthatches, Steller's Jay, and Bohemian Waxwings will also move several hundred miles to find food. While the waxwings are not usually attracted to bird feeders, the sight of a flock of several hundred Bohemian Waxwings settling into your neighbor's crabapple tree is worth more than a passing glance!

Data gathered from the 2004 Christmas Bird Count showed that the northern Rocky Mountains experienced large flights of Red Crossbills, Pine Grosbeaks, and Pine Siskins last winter. In addition, Bohemian Waxwings numbers were higher than they have been in 20 years as they invaded a great many areas across the region. Here in Idaho, the state experienced a noteworthy invasion of Eastern Blue Jays. Birders have already reported seeing Blue Jays this fall, causing them to wonder whether another irruption of this brassy, but beautiful bird is underway.

Irruption years bring us the possibility of just about anything at our feeders. They add another layer of anticipation to the season and another reason why many of us find feeding the birds such a great pleasure.

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Winter Wildlife Events

Bald Eagle Days-Boise

January 25th — Wildlife Film Festival @ Flicks

January 26th — Wildlife Film Festival @ Flicks

January 26th — Benefit Gala and art auction for Barber Pool @ the Basque Center

January 27th — School groups at the Shakespeare Festival

January 28th — Bald Eagle Day Celebration at the Shakespeare Festival. Call (208) 426-4354 for more information on Bald Eagle Days

Craters of the Moon

Jan 6th-7th — Winter Ecology Teacher's workshop-Tell a teacher you know! For college credit through Sawtooth Science Institute 208-788-9686.

Wednesdays and Thursdays in January and February

Teachers! Bring your students to Craters for a mini winter ecology lesson including a 1 mile ranger led snowshoe trek near the Visitor Center. We have snowshoes! Call the park at (208) 527-3257

Peregrine Fund -Nest Quest - Search of the Perfect Nest

February 11th — Adult admission will be half-price; children admitted for FREE. Presentations begin at 11:00AM and 2:00 PM. (208) 362-8687

Habitat Improvement Project

February 24-25th — This is a perfect opportunity for your school, scout, or community group to participate in an authentic service learning project that will benefit the wild raptors in our area. 208-362-8687

Project WILD: WILD about Birds of Prey

March 11-12th — To register, contact Lori Adams at (208) 287-2889. MK Nature Center-600 S. Walnut Street, Boise

MK Nature Center - Boise

CSI: Wildlife

February 11 — 10AM-12PM. Join us for an opportunity to conduct a Wildlife Crime Scene Investigation! Put on your Idaho Department of Fish and Game Conservation Officer's Badge and pick out pieces of evidence at the crime scene. You will even be able to put on your lab coat to analyze the evidence. Learn how to solve a wildlife case! Open 5th-8th grade. Cost \$15. Pre-registration required. Please call 334-2225

Snake River Audubon

January 14 — Eagle Count. Contact Mark Delwiche at (208) 525-9414 or Or delwiche@srv.net



208 • 287 • 2750

sfocht@idfg.idaho.gov

To submit an article, obtain a subscription, renew a subscription, or notify us of address change, contact the Editor at the above address or through e-mail:

Sara Focht
Editor

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