

BIRD EXPLORER

The birds of spring

BY PETER J. THIEMANN

In spring, birds put on a real show: breeding plumage! There is the spectacular Harlequin Duck that winters along our Pacific coast and then migrates inland to clear mountain streams for nesting and

raising its young. Nests of this species can be found in tree cavities and broken stumps or between boulders of fast-moving mountain streams. Only about 200 breeding pairs of Harlequin Ducks

are found in Oregon, with many of the overwintering flocks departing for northern areas in early spring. “Harlequin” comes from the

multicolored comic servant character from the Italian *commedia dell’arte* in the late 16th century.

The Common Loon can be seen all winter in its drab plumage along our Pacific shores. But in the spring, before it departs to mountain lakes farther north for nesting, the Common Loon puts on its beautiful breeding plumage as seen in my photo. “Loon” is derived from old Norse language, “lom,” meaning clumsy, because this species “runs” on water before becoming airborne. Sometimes, half a mountain lake is needed for a successful takeoff!

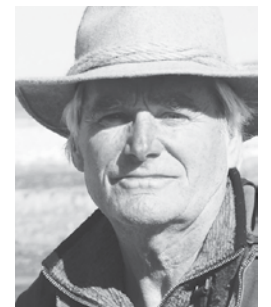
There was another awesome late winter bird sighting here in our mountains: a Northern Pygmy Owl, ounce for ounce the fiercest predator to be found. When birding in springtime, I always look at woodpecker holes and often find the five species of woodpeckers common in our region. But once in a while I find a roosting or even nesting owl that has taken residence. Owls do not build their own nests, but use cavities or nests from other species.

Common finds are Western Screech Owls, like the owls that are roosting now in my garden woodpecker holes. Rare to find is the Northern Pygmy Owl. It is Oregon’s smallest owl, hunts in daylight, and can be seen around birdfeeders where it looks for small birds and rodents. About the size of a robin, this owl is often overlooked when perched quietly on a low branch scanning the grasses below. Sometimes a flock of birds will harass the small owl and alert the birder looking. I captured some exceptional images of a Northern Pygmy Owl with a freshly caught meadow vole as large as the owl!

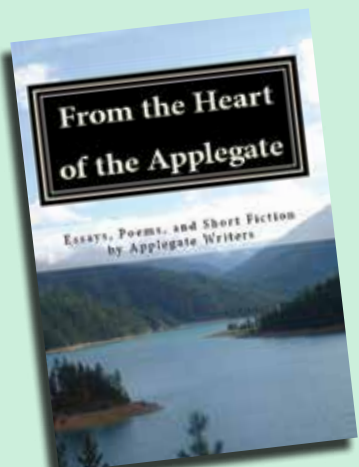
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Photos courtesy of Peter J. Thiemann flicker photo stream.



Photos, clockwise from top left: Harlequin Duck, Northern Pygmy Owl, and the Common Loon. Photos: Peter J. Thiemann





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