

Birding offers quiet outdoor recreation in winter

By **CLAIR JOHNSON**
Billings Gazette

BILLINGS, Mont. — If skiing isn't your thing but you are looking to enjoy the outdoors during the winter, consider bird watching.

Birding requires minimal gear and can be done any time of day or evening and almost anywhere — from backyards to backroads.

"It's a way to get outside and outdoors," said Steve Regele, president of the Yellowstone Valley Audubon Society. "It's hard to get sunshine in the winter. That's a big one."

Birds often can be easier to see in the winter because trees don't have leaves, he said.

"Birds aren't stupid," Regele said. They fly up high, look around and follow the water as they migrate through the state, he said.

The adjacent upland and sagebrush grasslands around Big Lake can be places to spot birds like horned larks, along with owl and raptor species.

Drives along back roads also offer opportunities to see a variety of bird species that forage along stubble fields.

"Take a drive through Molt to Rapelje, spend a little money at Rapelje and buy breakfast," Regele said. Along the way there is a good chance of seeing a snow bunting fly up from the ground, he said.

Snow buntings are medium-sized, black-and-white colored songbirds that winter in Montana before heading back to the far north for the summer.

Regele also urged birders to "take advantage of all your public lands and city parks." The lands not only are great places to go birding, he said, but using them also shows appreciation for public lands.

Species to spot

Organizations, like YVAS, offer organized field trips and provide



In this Jan. 27 photo, **Donn Bartlett** looks for birds at Riverfront Park in Billings, Mont. Billings and the surrounding area offer numerous places to see a variety of species, some of which show up only during the winter, said Steve Regele, president of the Yellowstone Valley Audubon Society.

agencies with birding information collected year-round by members and participants.

Regele said birding information collected and reported to government and research organizations helps agencies track trends and plan for managing areas.

One of YVAS's signature events is the annual Christmas Bird Count, which was held Dec. 19 in the Billings area and is part of the nationwide count sponsored by the National Audubon Society.

That count tallied a total of 67 species observed within a 15-mile diameter circle round downtown

Billings during the day-long event. That included five new species.

The new species included long-eared owl, black rosy-finch, double-crested cormorant, pied-bill grebe and osprey. A total of 25,101 birds were seen, with the most common bird being the European starling followed by the Canada goose.

The osprey sighting was unusual because while the species is becoming more common along the Yellowstone River, osprey usually fly south for the winter and return to nest in the spring.

The osprey, Regele said, may have found a good food supply, got

confused or maybe was a really late migrator. "Birds don't read all the books," he joked.

The Christmas count also noted 33 species that were not seen but had been spotted on previous counts.

To help keep track of birds, people can get a checklist of Montana Birds from FWP. The checklist has 427 species of birds that have been observed in Montana.

During another count in early January, the annual eagle count, Regele said 27 bald eagles and one possibly golden eagle, were spotted along the Yellowstone River,

Casey Page/The Billings Gazette via AP

Studies aim to restore habitat of imperiled Northwest fish

By **KEITH RIDLER**
Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho — Scientists in the Pacific Northwest are studying more than a dozen watersheds to develop templates on habitat restoration that could be used in similar streams to bolster struggling fish populations.

The federal government lists 28 populations of salmon and steelhead on the West Coast that need protections due to low numbers despite spending millions of dollars every year on restoration efforts.

The studies aim to make those efforts more successful. They focus on 17 watersheds in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Northern California and British Columbia and examine the benefit of everything from dam removal to building artificial beaver dams in tributaries.

Creating templates for habitat restoration could save time and money by using strategies known to produce good results in similar habitats in the region, said George Pess, a research fisheries biologist for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

"The overall goal is to learn enough to be smart about our restoration," he said, noting that the studies will offer recommendations to private, tribal and government entities but won't produce any legally binding regulations.

Most of the studies began in the 2000s. Pess said scientists are still discovering what works and the program will require years of monitoring.

They are examining how fish use waterways and the challenges salmon and steelhead face throughout their lives in the different watersheds.

In previous restoration efforts, officials have taken out barriers, such as dams, to open up spawning habitat. The studies go further by trying to determine whether removing the barriers leads fish to change when



In this undated photo provided by NOAA Fisheries, underwater antennas are visible stretching across the Little River, a tributary of the Elwha River in Washington state, where they track fish as part of intensively monitored watershed studies to determine how the fish respond to habitat restoration.

they go to the ocean and return as adults, Pess said. That would mean restoration efforts need to ensure enough water flows through streams at critical times.

"It's a terrific and much-needed project — getting a scientific basis for really teasing out the factors preventing the recovery of wild steelhead and salmon," said Guido Rahr, president of the Wild Salmon Center, which works to protect rivers and wild salmon populations. "They've chosen watersheds with diverse and different geographies. It's really going to be helpful."

In northern Idaho's Potlatch River, a tributary of the Clearwater River, monitoring started in 2005 and resto-

ration work began in 2009. About 1,000 wild steelhead use the Potlatch.

Last year, state workers for the first time counted steelhead spawning beds above an area where a dam had been removed, said Brian Knoth, a fisheries biologist with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game.

Whether opening new habitat increases fish numbers or simply causes the existing population to spread out is a frequent question in the 17 study areas.

To get an answer, scientists place small tags in fish that give off a signal when passing through an electronic field. That allows young fish leaving and then returning as adults to be counted.

On central Oregon's Bridge Creek, workers have built artificial beaver dams as part of the study, discovering that the real animals moved in to expand on human efforts.

"It's OK if natural beavers join in on the fun," said Stephen Bennett, a research associate of watershed sciences at Utah State University who is involved with that and other studies.

Of the 17 studies, nine are in Washington state. Perhaps the most ambitious involves the Elwha River and the 2012 removal of a 100-foot dam that increased habitat by 300 percent. It more than a doubled spawning beds for chinook salmon and steelhead above the dam site.

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— **Guido Rahr**, president of the Wild Salmon Center

SKI REPORT

Spout Springs

Tollgate, Ore.
New snow: None
Base depth: Unrecorded
Conditions: Solid base, some freeze and thaw.
Now open Friday and Saturday until 9 p.m. for night skiing

Anthony Lakes

North Powder, Ore.
New snow: None
Base depth: 66"
Conditions: Packed powder on groom, warm weather softened groomed runs. Live music on Saturday from 3-6 p.m.

Ski Bluewood

Dayton, Wash.
New snow: None
Base: 78"
Conditions: Spring conditions after warm days, machine groomed. Both terrain parks open.

Ski Fergi

Joseph, Ore.
New snow: None
Depth: 30" at top
Conditions: Great snow, groomed runs. Open through the weekend.

Mt. Hood Meadows

Government Camp, Ore.
New snow: None
Depth: 100"
Conditions: Hardpack groom. Hardpack, refrozen snow, and moguls off the groom. Spring snow, weather conditions.



Friday: 5 pm to 9 pm
Saturday: 9 am to 9 pm
Sunday: 9 am to 4 pm
All Holidays: 9 am to 4 pm
Night skiing starts January 1st and is Friday 5 pm - 9 pm & Saturday 5 pm - 9 pm

BRIEFLY

Increase in national parks visitors reaches Crater Lake

BEND (AP) — Park officials are partially crediting the record number of Crater Lake National Park visitors last year to a low snowpack that opened roads and facilities earlier.

The *Bulletin* reports a news release from the park shows visitation up 13.5 percent compared to 2014, at 664,000 visitors in 2015.

The park has been closely tracking visitors for 25 years.

Last winter's low snowpack allowed the park's roads and facilities to open earlier in the spring.

The data at Crater Lake is in line with a countrywide increase in visitors to national parks. The 305 million visitors in the national parks system in 2015 exceeded the previous year's record.

Interior asked to protect Grand Canyon employees

GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK, Ariz. (AP) — Arizona's congressional delegation says the National Park Service must do more to protect Grand Canyon employees who participate on the agency's rafting trips.

A report released last month by a federal watchdog found that Park Service workers have preyed on their female colleagues, demanding sex and retaliating against women who refused.

The Park Service conducts about a dozen rafting trips on the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon each year.

The agency banned alcohol on the trips and required pre-trip briefings while the Interior Department's Office of the Inspector General looked into allegations of sexual harassment.

Arizona's congressional delegation says those reforms are insufficient. The representatives asked Interior Secretary Sally Jewell in a letter to do more to ensure workers are protected from abuse.

National Park Service, Google sharing U.S. artifacts online

TUSKEGEE, Ala. (AP) — The National Park Service and Google are making it easier to visit U.S. historic sites without leaving home.

The federal agency and the technology giant announced a partnership Thursday in which images of more than 3,800 artworks and artifacts from parks are being added to Google's database of online imagery.

Also, photos of dozens of National Park Service sites are being added to Google Street View, which already offers ground-level views of many

park attractions.

Interior Secretary Sally Jewell made the announcement at the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site, where the first black U.S. military pilots trained during World War II. The site is featured in an online museum called the Google Cultural Institute.

Grand Teton National Park plans to demolish, restore buildings

JACKSON, Wyo. (AP) — A plan to renovate or demolish a number of historic Grand Teton National Park buildings is drawing pushback from local residents.

The *Jackson Hole News and Guide* reports the proposed Historic Properties Management Plan targets three decades-old building clusters for removal and would restore four other dilapidated properties.