

A Christmas songbird tradition

By **BRAD TRUMBO**
For the East Oregonian

PENDLETON — I talk a good game about hunting and fishing, and most of my fondest memories revolve directly around those two passions. This doesn't detract from my holistic appreciation for the natural world, sans my double-gun and bird dog.

Among my favorite childhood memories is the barn-shaped bird feeder my grandparents hung in front of their Appalachian living room picture window. Cardinals, titmice, nuthatches, downy woodpeckers and black-capped chickadees would chatter and fuss for space at that feeder and suet cakes all winter.

I vividly recall one particular lazy weekend afternoon kicked back in an old recliner, sipping hot cocoa; my grandparents reading the paper and working word finds. Their wood furnace stood atop a beautiful river rock hearth my grandpa had built. The blower kicked on, filling the room with the irreplaceable warmth of wood heat as I gazed contently at the first snow of December falling around these fluttering songbirds and settling thick atop the feeder.

The American robin in its modest appearance has always been one of my favorite birds, their glorious melody signaling spring as the dew settles cold on freshly greened lawns. And then there are the jays. Blue jays were a common bully in my hometown, but the first time I laid eyes on a Steller's jay was the first time I moved to the Pacific Northwest, cruising Highway 12 along the Lochsa River in Idaho. I still marvel at Steller's jays as I scramble across the ridge tops in the Blues pursuing grouse and mule deer.

The two masked western species that I enjoy the most are the sleek, olive-yellow cedar waxwing, and the Bullock's oriole with its black-accented pumpkin plumage — each sporting a Lone Ranger eye patch and swapping seasonal appearances at my little homestead near Waitsburg, Washington. The Bullock's oriole drops by in the spring to enjoy fruit bits that I hang from the clothesline, and raises a clutch in the massive white alders along my spring seep. The cedar waxwing drops in from the higher elevations about the time snow finally settles in our little canyon. They gorge alongside robins on our ornamental crabapples and mountain ash.

Other common winter visitors to the local drylands are the house finch, gold finch, house sparrow, Oregon junco, white-breasted nuthatch and spotted towhee.

My musing over common songbirds may seem curious, but songbirds are anything but common. Songbirds have the ability to bring



Photo contributed by Bradly Trumbo

A chilly male house finch pauses momentarily among the branches of a crabapple.



Photo contributed by Bradly Trumbo

A male Oregon junco takes a break from foraging in the snow.



Photo contributed by Bradly Trumbo

A hungry male house finch poses atop a feeder shepherd's hook.



Photo contributed by Bradly Trumbo

A male Oregon junco basks in the warm rays a winter sunset.

nature's beauty to virtually any landscape. Be it a city block or secluded ranch home, songbirds are ever-present. They connect us with our natural world, inspire artists, develop ornithologists and arouse wonder in young and old. What's more, songbirds seasonally migrate thousands of miles across North America from Can-

ada to Mexico and points south. Their extensive migration makes songbirds vulnerable to severe weather patterns, food shortages and predators.

Aside from the natural life challenges, songbirds have been imperiled by hunting since the 19th century. Hunting for plumage caused the extinction of spe-

cies like the passenger pigeon and Carolina parakeet. Fortunately, our conservation ethics in North America improved, and the Lacey Act was passed in 1900, followed by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1918. Both acts still stand today, protecting songbirds from harm in the U.S.

Prior to our conservation legislation, early ornithologists sought to change a Christmas tradition known as "the side hunt" where folks would choose sides and descend upon the hills. The side returning with the most species of fur and feather claimed a win. One hundred nineteen years ago on Christmas Day, the burgeoning Audubon Society and ornithologist Frank Chapman imposed the Christmas Bird Count in lieu of the traditional hunt. That first Christmas, 25 different counts tallied 90 species, and the tradition stuck.

One of the longest-running datasets in the history of wildlife science, the citizen-driven data collection effort provides criti-

cal input to long-term population trend monitoring, as well as helping to guide conservation efforts in North America.

"The data collected by observers over the past century allow Audubon researchers, conservation biologists, wildlife agencies and other interested individuals to study the long-term health and status of bird populations across North America," explains the Audubon Society.

Understanding population trends is important for understanding the effects of environmental changes on migratory birds and natural resources. And, in some cases, population trends can serve as the proverbial canary in the mine shaft.

The beauty of the Christmas Bird Count is that anyone with the desire can participate. Bird counts are held within a 15-mile radius of a designated point. Participants may travel to a common location and disperse with an organized group or, if living within that 15-mile radius, folks can simply report the species that visit their feeder on the given count day.

Presently, Umatilla, Wallowa and Baker counties have a designated count center with point of contact information below. Union County has a count center, but is not currently available for new participants. You can learn more about the Christmas Bird Count, participation in counts and review prior year and population status data by visiting www.audubon.org/conservation/science/christmas-bird-count.

If you are looking for an exciting family activity over the holidays that gets you outdoors and contributes to a good cause, look no further. Even a hunter like myself is fascinated with the splendor of our native songbirds and bird watching. And who doesn't enjoy some friendly family competition over the holidays?

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Brad Trumbo is a fish and wildlife biologist and outdoor writer in Waitsburg, Washington, where he also actively serves the Walla Walla-based Blue Mountain Pheasants Forever chapter. For tips and tales of outdoor pursuits and conservation, visit www.bradtrumbo.com.

MORE INFORMATION

Baker County info:

Bruce Raffety — 541-523-2551 or email bbraf820@yahoo.com

Umatilla County info:

George Ruby — 541-278-2472 or email gtrnrb@yahoo.com
Aaron Skirvin — 541-215-0761 or email umatbirder@yahoo.com

Wallowa County info:

Mike Hansen — 541-398-8225 or email mhansen97846@gmail.com

CAUGHT OVGARD

Christmas fishing in Slovenia well worth the trip

By **LUKE OVGARD**
For the East Oregonian

PORTOROŽ, Slovenia — My mom's side of the family, the Tauchers, is Slovenian. This is partly why I went to Slovenia last year during the Christmas season.

Some of you find this interesting while others are making note of my mother's maiden name to plan a full-scale attack on my bank account. Joke's on you, though, because I'm still paying off that trip, so you'll be sorely disappointed.

I've been to Europe twice, but my second trip was infinitely better. It fell during the Christmas season last year, and Christmas in Europe is next-level, my friends. It puts the Hallmark Channel and the 25 Days of Christmas to shame. Festive doesn't come close to describing the array of lights, the numerous "Christmas Markets" found in every city — large and small — the snow, the picturesque cityscapes, or the music flowing out of every establishment to put a twinkle in every eye and a smile on every face. Anyone left unmotivated to get into the Christmas spirit won't be able to resist when cuddled by the warm smells of whatever regional Christmas pastry is cooking nearby. There's no doubt: Europe does Christmas right.



Photo contributed by Luke Ovgard

The five-spotted wrasse, *Symphodus roissali*, is found throughout the Mediterranean and Adriatic, but it is nonetheless beautiful.

Slovenia

Our entire trip to Europe began when brother, Gabe, decided to study abroad in Vienna. I never learned her name, but his presence over there got me on a plane. I arrived days after he proposed to his then-girlfriend, Rylee. Spoiler alert: they've been married almost three months now.

My parents, my brother Jake, and I all had different itineraries. My schedule allowed me to arrive first and leave last, I humble brag, but for about 10 days, we were all together. As a group, we got to see much of Austria, Bavarian Germany,

Czechia and Slovenia.

Without a doubt, Slovenia was the most consistently beautiful place I've ever been to. From the stone-cobbled oceanside walkways to the snow-capped Slovenian Alps, to the ancient foreboding castles and churches clashing with modernity of high rises in the capital of Ljubljana, the country accounting for half of my genetics is incredible. Truly incredible.

Despite the grandeur of Ljubljana and the Alps and sharing the wonder with my family, escaping to the coastal town of Portorož for a couple days' fishing

added another layer to the experience.

By night

The Adriatic is unique. Tucked away in the corner just off the Mediterranean, it's an easily forgotten area, and that's fine with me. Apart from some traffic to and from a classy, Monte Carlo-esque casino, the sleepy oceanside town was mine to behold with just a handful of other tourists.

I walked the cobblestones, sampled pastries and enjoyed what might have been the best meal I've had in Europe at a small restaurant on the harbor, enjoyed

a whole, skin-on seabream, a mixture of steamed greens and potatoes and the best bread not containing garlic the world has ever known. The best part? I paid just 11 euros for the meal.

Ambiance aside, I was there to fish. I'd separated from the family for two days in hopes of getting a few new species for the list, but my first night was slow. The drizzle and wind was significant enough to make sight fishing very difficult, and since I didn't have ideal bait, I made due with — gulp! — artificials.

The only fish I could find that didn't bolt at the sight of my light was a goby of some sort. While the light didn't scare it, my bait did. Every time I dropped the bait in its face, it would dart under a large rock. I spent fully two hours playing cat-and-mouse with the little bugger, but eventually, my tenacity overcame its instincts, and I held my first rock goby in my hand.

Given the late hour, I called it a night and retreated to my Airbnb at the outskirts of town.

By day

I started my day with some delicious coffee — because Europe — and a pastry. I bought some shrimp for bait at a grocery store, and then headed to the waterfront.

My expectations were realistic, so I decided to focus on micro species. I was able to catch gobies left and right during the day, sighting them, and then coaxing them from beneath rocks and underwater wreckage with my tiny baited hook.

In total, I caught black goby, Sarato's goby, and big-scale sand smelt as I walked around the marina. It was cold, but the wind and rain stayed away. I was grateful for the reprieve and, though the fishing was still fairly slow, I was happy to be catching fish.

My day ended when I spotted the reef at the marina inlet move ever so slightly. It was a fish, a wrasse that blended in perfectly with its surroundings. The fish was very picky and wouldn't bite until I downsized my split shot and drifted the tiny shrimp fleck into its face. When it took the bait, I set the hook and landed my first five-spotted wrasse.

Since I was supposed to rendezvous with the fam in Ljubljana, I had to call it a day. Washing the bait from my hands, I took one last look at Portorož, through the eyes of my Taucher ancestors, and liked what I saw.

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