

KLAMATH BASIN | BIRDING

Festival renews focus on refuges and wildlife

BY ALEX SCHWARTZ
(Klamath Falls) Herald and News
The Klamath Basin’s “Everglades of the West” once attracted millions of birds. Over the past few decades, the area has attracted many thousands of birders.

But after two years of intense drought, most of the watershed’s iconic wetlands are high and dry. Now the Winter Wings Festival, which typically celebrates the Klamath’s avian bounty each February, is making a bit of a pivot.

Previous years’ Winter Wings Festivals, presented by the Klamath Basin Audubon Society, have always included birding field trips to Lower Klamath and Tule Lake National Wildlife Refuges, which are all that’s left of hundreds of thousands of acres of wetlands that once filled the Upper Klamath Basin.

The refuges were renowned for their variety of migratory bird species, particularly waterfowl and bald eagles, due to their crucial position on the Pacific Flyway. As many as 80% of all migrating birds on the West Coast of North America stop here to rest and eat on their journeys between the Arctic and the tropics.

But wetland habitat on both refuges has shrunk dramatically over the last two decades due to the Klamath Basin’s water crisis, magnified by climate change and a megadrought in the Western U.S. The refuges haven’t received full water deliveries from the Klamath Project since the 1990s, and bird counts have fallen significantly as more avian travelers begin to skip these crucial rest stops. In recent years, low water and record temperatures have led to botulism outbreaks in late summer that kill tens of thousands of waterbirds.

This winter, only a few thousand acres on Tule Lake Refuge’s Sump 1B remain wet — the refuge’s larger wetland unit and all but a few puddles worth of Lower Klamath Refuge sit dry and cracked.

There are still birds, but Winter Wings attendees visiting the basin for the first time since 2020 may be in for a shock.

“The last time the refuge was this dry was the Dust Bowl. This is unprecedented,” said Karl Wenner, local conservationist and an owner of Lakeside Farms. “You’re kind of whistling through the graveyard to just say, ‘Well, let’s look at birds and have a good time and not talk about what’s going on.’”

This year, the festival program includes seven presentations and field trips directly addressing the decline of the Klamath refuges, how they fit into the basin’s water crisis and what can be done to fix things. Refuge staff, local historians, private landowners and non-governmental organizations are lined up to help festival-goers unravel the complexities of the Klamath from the avian perspective.

The series kicks off on Friday, Feb. 18, with a tour of the Klamath Project and a discussion of how the arrival of settlers altered the Klamath Basin’s wetlands, led by Klamath County Museum Director Todd Kepple. That afternoon, Klamath Basin Refuge Complex Supervisory Biologist John Vradenburg will lead a talk describing the Upper Klamath Basin’s pivotal role in the Pacific Flyway and how the decline of these wetlands has meant for all of North America.

“In the basin, it’s just such a struggle right now because we’re losing that relevancy at the landscape scale,” Vradenburg said. “We’re trying to keep in people’s minds just how important this place is for the Pacific Flyway and for continental waterbird populations.”

Wenner will then speak about Lakeside Farms, a unique restoration project that aims to improve water quality, provide wetland habitat for waterfowl and even grow endangered suckers, all on the same plot of land adjacent to Upper Klamath Lake. Attendees will be able to visit the farm Friday evening.



Herald and News

Birds fly over Sump 1B in Tule Lake National Wildlife Refuge on Feb. 8.



A bald eagle sits in a tree in Tule Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

Meanwhile, Mark Hennelly, California Waterfowl Association’s vice president for advocacy, will discuss the significance of Tule Lake and Lower Klamath refuges, the negative effects of their recent chronic dryness and his organization’s efforts to transfer upstream water rights to Lower Klamath. “It’s an opportunity to further educate people about the historic importance of the Klamath refuges for waterfowl,” Hennelly said.

On Saturday, Lower Klamath Interpretive Park Ranger Stephen Rooker will chart the history of conservation photography in the Klamath Basin and explain how naturalists have used images to spur the protection of natural resources. Oregon State University Graduate Student Jami Dennis will then use visual materials like maps, data visualizations and photos to tell a story of change in the Klamath over the past century.

Anne Wenner, one of the co-coordinators of the Winter Wings Festival, said past pro-

gramming hasn’t necessarily shied away from acknowledging the problem on the refuges. Previous festivals have included discussions about agricultural activities on the refuge, the historical decline of wetland habitat and talks on avian botulism. But this year, she said the focus will be more holistic.

‘Things look really different’

Wenner said festival leadership would have likely included this lineup of talks as part of the 2021 Winter Wings Festival, which was canceled due to COVID-19. Once they decided to make the 2022 festival in-person, they knew it would be remiss not to acknowledge and explain the dire conditions of the basin’s wetlands that festival-goers will inevitably encounter.

“We’ve hit the tipping point now. We may lose the Pacific Flyway,” Wenner said. “With the Klamath Basin being the most important spot in the Pacific Flyway for migratory waterfowl, this may be the galvanizing thing.”

Vradenburg said he hopes this year’s festival programming will contextualize the changes attendees are likely to notice when bird-watching this year. He expects birders to spot eagles and the spring’s

first migrating waterfowl closer to Klamath Falls or on nearby flooded agricultural fields rather than on the dry refuges themselves.

“It’s important for people to love the birds and see the birds and experience the birds, because that’s where you make your connection. But it’s also important for people to understand the issues,” he said. “Let’s educate people so they know why, when they’re going down to the refuge, things look really different.”

Winter Wings has always

had a conservation angle — in fact, the festival originally began in 1980 as a scientific symposium of sorts for bald eagle conservation shortly before that species became listed under the Endangered Species Act. The conference was renamed “Winter Wings” in 2005 as the bald eagle began to recover.

“Conservation has always been a focus of the festival,” Karl Wenner said. “Now it’s just become so dire that they’re really trying to look at solutions.”

OBITUARY



David Carson

March 7, 1949 - November 29, 2021

David Leroy Carson passed away on November 29, 2021, from heart disease. He was born in Dixon Illinois March 7, 1949, to Stella Carson. He was a talented basketball player but due to difficulties at home, Dave moved out West to Oregon in the early 1970s. He married Doreen VonReyn and was the father to Jamie, Justin, and Kyle. David was a talented carpenter and ran his own construction business for many years. Many would consider Dave “ornery” but those that knew him best loved him for his no-nonsense attitude and willingness to set things right.

After many years in Fairview and Coquille, Dave made his way to Redmond Oregon working through the ranks at Tum A Lum lumber with his last position as a company officer and purchaser working for Marvin May, a dear friend to the very end. He loved the Cubs, fishing, BBQ, dominos, and being with his grandkids. David is survived by his three sons, their wives, and 5 grandchildren. Unfortunately, Dave was unable to meet his newest granddaughter, Savannah Carson, born 11 days before his passing.

Per request, there will be no formal funeral, instead, he will be cremated and his ashes spread in his favorite place, the Blue Ridge Mountains between Fairview and Coos Bay. Please pass on any well wishes or comments to Jamie Carson carson0802@gmail.com. In lieu of flowers please consider a donation to your local Humane Society.

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