

The INDEPENDENT

Published on the first and third Thursdays of each month by The Independent, LLC, 725 Bridge St., Vernonia, OR 97064. Phone/Fax: 503-429-9410.

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Printed on recycled paper with vegetable based dyes

Opinion

Where did all the birds go?

Three years ago, in June, people enjoying Vernonia Lake could see hundreds of Red-winged blackbirds, and it was common to see both Blue and Green Herons, along with a changing array of ducks. The songs of the blackbirds would ring out from all around the lake as you strolled along.

This year, there might be 30, maybe, Red-winged blackbirds around the lake. Is this the result of some natural dieback? Some natural catastrophe? No, it's the result of a man-made catastrophe. The first year KUPL held their fishing derby at Vernonia Lake, they had to work around the birds and find natural openings in the reeds to fish from. Last year, it was decided by the event committee in charge that there needed to be more openings, more access for more people to be able to fish during the KUPL fishing derby. The result was that committee members and public works employees took weed-whackers to the reeds. Then, the pumps ran night and day to bring the lake level higher. The result was fewer blackbirds. The reason – blackbirds nest in the reeds, about a foot to a foot-and-a-half above the water line. Last year, those weed-whackers said they didn't find any birds, just empty nests. Would you hang out in a nest being shaken by a weed-whacker, let alone the noise those things make? Didn't think so. And, once the water level rises a foot, where does that leave the nestlings? Right, under water.

It was pointed out to the city last year by a number of people that Red-winged blackbirds are a protected species under the Federal Migratory Bird Act. The response, "oh, didn't know that. So sorry, won't happen again."

This year, it not only happened again, but happened at a much greater level, and just when the birds were nesting. The grass was cut down to the reeds beside the lake, the reeds on the grass side have been cut twice, the reeds near the already artificial openings were cut further back and the water level was raised.

The result – only 30 or so blackbirds. They have found the lake inhospitable for two years running, even though they should be protected.

Particularly this year, with spring as cold as it has been, nesting has been delayed and then decimated.

Will the blackbirds be allowed to nest at the lake again? We hope so.

OUR HEARTS GO
OUT TO YOU..



Out of My Mind . . .

by Noni Andersen

Fiscal (in)sanity was the topic of last month's column. In it, I related how the Democratic House had passed a bill to raise taxes on "hedge fund" managers and their ilk, and to use that revenue to offset tax relief for less affluent taxpayers. The White House rejected that idea, of course. More explanation is needed, however.

In 2001, the Republicans "solved" the recession caused greatly by the dot.com-bust, with huge tax breaks to the very rich, and by cutting interest rates so American corporations could invest in production.

In 2002-2006 they did invest, but not for job creation. The low-cost money (1-percent to banks) was used to offer easy-to-get mortgages with initial rates that encouraged people to think they could afford to borrow, and homeowners with existing mortgages were enticed to refinance. The financial wheeler-dealers then "bundled" shaky mortgages with more valuable IOUs and sold these bundles around the world.

In 2007-2008 financial institutions around the world started discovering that billions (maybe trillions) of the IOUs were essentially worthless.

Most of the administration-protected hedge fund managers are in the economic top one-percent (1%), some of them taking home more than a billion dollars a year. The number of U.S. billionaires increased from 186 in 2001 to 415 in 2008. In that same time span, their net worth increased from \$186 billion to about \$19 trillion.

The salary of a full-time federal minimum-wage earner in 2007 was \$12,168.

So, individual mega-buck earners are doing very well, but how about corporations? Some numbers can put this in perspective:

Before taxes, corporate profits were \$719.2 billion in 2001, \$1,769.5 billion in 2008.

After taxes, corporate profits were \$503.8 billion in 2001, \$1,351.9 billion in 2008.

Pharmaceutical companies did even better, with profits of about 18.5% of sales income, compared to 3.1% for other top-500 companies. Remember, Bush and company's Medicare drug benefit law prohibits Medicare from bargaining for lower prices.

Bringing the numbers down to earth, where most of us reside, let's look at fossil fuels (averages used are national, not state):

Average price of a gallon of home heating oil in 2001 was \$1.40, in March 2008 was \$3.39.

Average price of a gallon of gasoline in 2001 was \$1.47, in March 2008 was \$3.14.

Portion of our liquid fuels imported in 2001 was 52.75%, in 2008, it is 60.38%.

Exxon/Mobil profits in 2001 were \$7.9 billion, in 2008 it is \$36.1 billion.

In his memoir *The Age of Turbulence*, Alan Greenspan wrote "I am saddened that it is politically inconvenient to acknowledge what everyone knows: The Iraq war is largely about oil."

Does anyone still wonder why the administration fought so hard to prevent public knowledge about who was on their Energy Task Force?

Sources: Congressional Budget Office, Center on Budget & Policy Priorities, U.S. Dep't of Labor, Standard & Poor, ourfuture.org, hightowerlowdown.org