



# The Pileated Post

## Quarterly Newsletter Friends of the Little Pend Oreille NWR

Spring 2012

[http:// www.refugefriends.com](http://www.refugefriends.com)

Number 40

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### From the President

The snow is still falling but with the arrival of numerous Red winged Blackbirds at my feeders I know that spring is just around the corner. Spring promises to be a busy time for the Friends. We have many projects and activities planned for the upcoming months.

In March the Friends will have a booth at the Colville Home and Garden show. Come by and learn about the refuge and our organization. We will have information on hikes and other activities, such as birding and fishing, that you can enjoy at the refuge. You can also find

out information on volunteer opportunities with the Friends at the Refuge.

After the gates open at the Refuge in mid April, we will begin assessing the maintenance needs of the McDowell Marsh Environmental Education Trail (McMEET) and the Mill Butte trail. We already have scheduled our annual trail clean up for the McMEET trail and could use all the help we can get. We plan to meet at the McDowell Lake parking lot at 9:30 Saturday May 5<sup>th</sup>. We will provide the tools. All you need to bring is a good pair of work gloves, some lunch and water. Stay and work as long as you want. If you wish to explore after doing some work we will gladly point out some short hikes in the area that you may not know about. One example is a short hike to the Sampson Orchard.

Also in May and June we will once again guide second and fifth grade classes for their educational field trip on the McMeet trail for the Colville School District. Tricia Woods has spearheaded this environmental education program for many years and we all would like to thank her for her hard work. We will be looking for volunteers, so keep checking our new and improved website for further details ([refugefriends.com](http://refugefriends.com)) and dates.

Looking for some fun and a little adventure? Once again I and some of the Friends will be leading a hike on the refuge. We hope to show off parts of the refuge that you may have not seen before. Last June we went on the 4.5 mile Old Timers trail of the Buffalo- Wilson Road. We are still looking into the location for this years hike. All I know so far is that it should occur in early June. I am also hoping to do another hike later in the summer. Last year a good time was had by all and I hope this becomes a new tradition. I will have a date

and location for the hike listed on our website perhaps by early May.

Well that looks like it for now. For further information on anything above or general information about the Friends or the Refuge please check our website or feel free to contact me by email at bigdan65@yahoo.com.

**Dan Price, President**

### **Refuge Manager's Meandering**

Over the last few months I've been asked several times about what activities are allowed on the refuge and how we determine those. I'd like to describe some of the agency policies governing allowable uses or activities on national wildlife refuges. To people more familiar with policies on other federal lands, U.S. Fish and Wildlife policies will seem significantly different. Legally, refuges are closed to all public uses until officially opened through a process known as a compatibility determination. I'll describe just what a compatibility determination is in a moment, but let that statement sink in for a minute. Most people think any activity is allowed on public land unless specifically forbidden by law, regulation or policy. Not so on refuges; nothing is allowed until officially allowed. That seems logical for some activities; obviously things like livestock grazing, off-road vehicles and even hunting should be scrutinized before being allowed, if at all. But that also means some uses that on first blush seem innocuous and harmless are also prohibited unless formally allowed. Examples might include sledding, ice skating or camping. Why so rigid? Quoting the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Manual: "Refuges are first and foremost national treasures for the conservation of wildlife. Through careful planning, consistent Refuge System wide application of regulations and policies, diligent monitoring of the impacts of uses on the wildlife resources, and preventing or eliminating uses not appropriate to the Refuge system, we can achieve the Refuge system conservation mission while also providing the public with lasting opportunities to enjoy quality, compatible, wildlife-dependent recreation." The Service takes the stewardship of wildlife resources very seriously.

When this refuge's Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) was adopted in 2000, public uses already occurring were examined to determine if they were "compatible." Again, I'll quote the manual: a compatible use is "A proposed or existing wildlife-dependent recreational use or any other use of a wildlife refuge that, based on sound professional judgment, will not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the National Wildlife Refuge System mission or the purposes of the national wildlife refuge." The list of recreational public uses deemed compatible on this refuge is fairly short (many have specific restrictions): hunting, fishing, environmental education, interpretation, wildlife observation, photography, camping, picnicking, horseback riding, snowmobiling (very limited area), cross country skiing, snowshoeing, dog sledding, hiking, youth scouting activity, berry picking, mushroom gathering, antler collecting, mountain biking, and jogging. No other recreational activities are currently allowed.

"What if my favorite activity (rock climbing, pine cone shucking, etc.) isn't currently allowed?" The procedure for determining if an activity is compatible is fairly involved. The refuge manager's first step is to determine if it is an "appropriate refuge use". An appropriate use must meet one of the following four conditions: it's a wildlife-dependent recreational use as identified in the Refuge Improvement Act (hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, environmental education and interpretation), the use contributes to fulfilling refuge purposes, it involves the take of fish and wildlife under State regulations, or the refuge manager has evaluated the use using procedures in the manual and found it is appropriate. I won't bludgeon you with the ten item decision criteria checklist I would use to reach an appropriateness decision, but one item on the checklist is often the deal-breaker; does the use contribute to the public's understanding and appreciation of the refuge's natural or cultural resources, or is it beneficial to those resources? Sledding and pine cone shucking might be fun, but do they contribute to the participants understanding of refuge resources, or is the refuge just a convenient place to play?

Assuming a new public use passes the "appropriateness test", it still must be scrutinized to determine if it is "compatible". Our manual provides a procedure for making that decision, but there are two important steps I'd like to point out. First, all proposed refuge uses re-

quire some level of public review and comment. And secondly, all refuge manager compatibility determinations require review and concurrence by the Regional Chief of Refuges. Point being, compatibility determinations are a big deal!

I hope this little peek into the inner workings of refuge management helps explain the process for making decisions about seemingly simple requests for recreational activities. Although the procedure seems excessive, tightly screening recreational uses is necessary to insure national wildlife refuges remain "national treasures for the conservation of wildlife."

**Jerry Cline, Manager, LPO**

### **Refuge Biologist's Report**

As my first winter here on the finest refuge in the system transitions into spring, I continue to be amazed at the jewel which is Little Pend Oreille National Wildlife Refuge. A lot has been going on lately for this often slow time of year. Although Bald Eagles are often seen along the river near headquarters we do not know a lot about them this time of year. Back in December while watching eagles from my office late in the day I noticed behavior typical of birds gathering at a common roost site. So I grabbed the scope and followed them until dark. Four birds including both adults and juvenile birds were observed entering roost sites near the river a little upstream of the headquarters. I understand this is the first eagle winter roost identified on the refuge. Eagles are spending time in the nest trees and should be beginning nesting process soon. Hopefully eagles will continue to use the Bailey Lake nest. Other signs of the approaching spring include the daily presence of both American Robins and Red-winged Blackbirds at the refuge headquarters lately.

In addition to regular office winter projects that are inevitable this time of years we have some special research projects going on this winter and early spring. We have been identifying sites on the refuge for some inventory and monitoring of our bat population. Bats are such a critical part of our ecosystems as insect predators and in cave systems throughout the world. As the introduced white-nose syndrome, caused by a fungus, continues its devastating march westward it will

be good to know what we have on the refuge. Bats can be monitored using automated recorders which can record and identify the ultrasonic calls the bats make. Each individual species has unique sounds and patterns than can be identified similar to the way we identify birds using their songs.

The other big research we have going on involves many people from the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. The refuge is one of the trapping sites being used to trap and put radio collars on white-tailed deer in NE Washington. Some of these collars have GPS unit is built in and automatically collect information and send it in via satellite several times a day. Technology has certainly changed the way we do wildlife biology over the years. So if you should happen to spot a deer wearing either collars or brightly colored ear tags rest assured that that animal is part a research project to tell us about its species in this neck of the woods. No, the critters are not out shopping high end jewelry stores. Let me know if you do see marked deer. We will be tracking these deer for the next couple of years but additional locations are always useful especially if you are able to read the numbers on the ear tag. This type of projects usually produces other interesting sightings and this one is no exception. The best one so far was when the researchers came across a mother cougar with two yearlings which had just killed a deer. It is pretty unusual to find obvious sign of a mother with young.

As the weather continues to warm I am looking forward to changing of the seasons. The snow is rapidly disappearing and we are definitely moving into the "snirt" season Jerry described in last spring's newsletter. The roads will be opening in about 6 weeks and the first the turkey hunters will be here as soon as that happens. I expect that the early season wildflowers should not be too far off. Migratory birds start arriving soon with many new arrivals showing up over the next couple of months. International Migratory Bird Day is the second weekend in May. It is May 12 this year and we will be doing an IMBD event on the refuge this year. This is a sunrise bird walk so we will meet at the headquarters at 6:00 and I will be leading a guided bird hike for a couple of hours. Barbara and Jerry may do additional walks if the number of people makes that necessary.

Whether it is observation, photography, turkey hunt-

ing, participating in a bird walk, or other activities; I hope you get a chance to come enjoy the wildlife and habitats on your refuge this spring.

*Editor's note: Mike is beginning a new educational contribution that will feature a single resident species of the refuge each quarterly issue of the Pileated Post.*

## Critter of the Season



Did you know that the world's largest mouse is an amphibian! As their name suggests muskrats are indeed in the same family as mice and rats. The family Cricetidae also includes such well known critters as brown rats and our own deer mice and bushy-tailed woodrats. In spite of appearances they are only distantly related to beavers; which are rodents of a different family.

They are other amphibious and even aquatic mice around the world the muskrat is the only one in western North America. Like beaver muskrat will come on land to rest or too feed but are much more comfortable in the water. They do not build dams but they do build houses which may resemble beaver lodges. The major difference is construction materials. Beaver lodges are primarily made of sticks whereas a muskrat's house may contain sticks but generally have large amounts of other vegetation especially cattail stalks. They have been known to move into old beaver lodges. They will eat a variety of materials including aquatic vegetation and assorted invertebrates. They have only partially webbed feet and when swimming they primarily use their tail. This gives them a very fish like movement when they are underwater. They are able to hold their breath much longer than beavers and they are able to tolerate high levels of carbon dioxide in their bodies. This feature is found in marine mammals like seals and

whales. The only other non-marine mammals able to do this are bears and some squirrels but only during hibernation. Here on the refuge muskrats are rare and difficult to find. Sightings have been recorded over the years on many of the lakes and wetlands. But sightings may not occur in many years. This January a muskrat came up Spring Creek and spent several days in the pond at headquarters during the coldest part of January. He put on quite a show for a few days before departing to parts unknown.

**Mike Munts, Refuge Staff**

## Winter Wildlife 2011-2012

November 21 was a three raptor day. That morning it snowed heavily. While in Mike's office I saw something at the top of a broken branch of the cottonwood tree. I could tell it was a raptor but could not identify it. Mike put a spotting scope on it and announced it was a Merlin. I was thrilled since I was out of the office when he spotted a merlin for the first time on November 16. It was a beautiful bird with the wide brown streaks on its breast.

During my lunch break I went outside to sweep the snow off my vehicle. While doing so, an immature bald eagle came in low and would have flown right over my head – but a co-worker drove into the driveway and the eagle veered off. It was flying much lower than those I usually see here.

At the end of the day I went out to my vehicle to load up my lunch box. As I turned to go back into the office, I glanced at the poplar trees to the east of the Headquarters (HQ) building a saw a northern pygmy owl perched at the very top of one of the poplars. I have seen these birds in the same location in previous years; hopefully this will not be the last viewing of this owl.

We got our feeders up late and I always enjoy guessing what bird will find the feeders first. Usually it is a black-capped chickadee; this year a northern flicker was the first bird to find the front bird feeder. Feeder activity has been slow. We kept seeing a female downy woodpecker for weeks; finally a male has started coming into the feeders. Hairy woodpeckers use the feeders along with three male northern flickers that

a co-worker duped the three amigos since they are usually all together under a feeder. Black-capped chickadees are common and song sparrows have been very secretive; we kept seeing some bird movement below the feeder in the reused Christmas tree. It took a while before we knew for sure it was a song sparrow diving for cover. Finches have been just about nonexistent at the feeders – all I have seen were house finches once or twice.

On November 28 Mike saw two adult bald eagles perched on conifers across the LPO River. He watched one dive into the river and come up empty. Later, late in the afternoon, he saw them fly upriver and perch again. He wondered if this was a night roosting spot. While we have seen eagles perched in the cottonwood tree behind HQ throughout the winter, we have not seen them as regularly as in past winters. A northern shrike has been seen in the cottonwood a few times this winter.

Probably the most exciting sightings were 2 flocks of common redpolls that were feeding in the alders just below the pond at HQ. They were close enough to get good looks at them through a spotting scope and they stayed for a surprisingly long time; but not long enough to positively identify any hoary redpolls. We thought we were seeing one bird that was quite a bit lighter in coloration but when we finally got the spotting scope on it- the flock moved on.

On December 29 I was surprised to see an almost all black woolly bear caterpillar on Bear Creek Road by the Log Barn near Cottonwood Campground.

Not much for mammal sightings. In mid-January our Law Enforcement Officer saw a cow moose with 2 calves in Lenhart Meadow. Jerry and I did see moose tracks in the Potter's Pond area recently.

I like to check the pond next to HQ to see what ducks are there. So far this winter I have seen mallards and hooded mergansers. You need to understand I do this from inside the office so I can't see much of the pond, and tall dried grasses block much of my view. On January 24 as I was glassing the pond I saw some ripples and what looked like a brown head sticking out of the water. It sat on the bank amongst the alders and appeared to be eating. After getting a spotting scope and setting it up, we identified the mystery mammal as a muskrat. It had been years since anyone had seen a

muskrat on the Refuge. Unfortunately the muskrat only stayed around for a few days. Unlike the belted kingfisher that has been at the pond every day lately. To date, I have not seen the northern pygmy owl return to the poplar tree perch.

Spring is here? Almost here. We saw the first male red-winged blackbirds February 13 and they have been singing since they arrived. The first American robins showed up on February 1<sup>st</sup>.

The Refuge gates will reopen April 14 and before we know it the wild flowers will start blooming and the songbirds will be singing and building nests to raise young. Spring is a great time to visit the Refuge – just remember spring turkey seasons runs from mid-April to the end of May.

**Barbara Harding, Refuge Staff**

## **Photographers Wanted!**

The more time one spends out at our Refuge, the more one becomes aware of the variety of opportunities for taking wonderful photos of this unique place in our corner of northeastern Washington. Ours isn't a single season refuge. It changes from day-to-day, week-to-week, and season-to-season. There are hidden corners of our Refuge to explore with one's camera. There are photo-ops just waiting for visitors on any of their trips to the LPO.

The 2012 Friend of the LPO Photo Contest began last August 16<sup>th</sup> and will extend until next (2012) August 15<sup>th</sup>. We are looking for pictures of the flora and fauna, of panoramas, and of people using the Refuge. We are also looking for photos from students.

Information and entry forms are available from me at [janderson@ultraplix.com](mailto:janderson@ultraplix.com). Next time you visit the Refuge, don't forget your camera!

**Joel Anderson , Board Member**

## Newsletter Necessities

### Number 40 - Jim Groth - Editor

To send comments, write articles for the newsletter, or to contribute items of interest, please contact:

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P.O. Box 215, Colville, WA 99114

Email: [larchsavage@yahoo.com](mailto:larchsavage@yahoo.com)

*The Pileated Post* is published quarterly and is mailed to all *Friends of the Little Pend Oreille National Wildlife Refuge*.

### Calendar

#### March

14<sup>th</sup> – Board Meeting – 6:00 p.m.

#### April

11<sup>th</sup> – Board Meeting – 6:00 p.m.

#### May

5<sup>th</sup> – McMeet Trail Cleanup – 9:30 AM

9<sup>th</sup> – Board Meeting – 6:00 p.m.

**Our Mission:** The Friends of the Little Pend Oreille National Wildlife Refuge is an independent, nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting the conservation of native fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats on the Refuge, providing educational opportunities, and fostering understanding and appreciation of the Refuge.



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