



The Pileated Post

Quarterly Newsletter Friends of the Little Pend Oreille NWR

Winter 2013

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

Number 47

From the President

There are two important upcoming events to look forward to this winter. The annual Winter Bird Count on the refuge will be Wednesday January 8, 8:00 AM at the Headquarters. If you have never been to the bird count here are the basics: We will divide into a number of groups that go out on various routes on the refuge. There are routes that can be driven and there are others that require some hiking, skiing, or snowshoeing, depending on weather and snow conditions. We have never canceled dues to weather so dress appropriately. If you are not a birder you are still welcomed to come out, we will team you up with someone who can help you out. The event is a good way to meet the staff and other friends as well as the chance to possibly go out to a part of the refuge you have never seen. The count will last about 3 hours followed by lunch. The staff provides soup and the rest of us bring a side dish. Hope to see you there.

In January the Board and Friends have our annual winter retreat. The retreat is a working meeting where we set up priorities, projects and events for the year as well as work on the future direction of the group. All are welcomed to attend. The retreat will be Saturday January 11, 9:00 at the Refuge – exact location there has yet to be decided. Our schedule will be: 9:00 – 9:30 coffee and breakfast followed by 9:30 to about noon the business meeting and discussions. A potluck lunch will follow so please bring a main course or side dish. After lunch you will have a chance to hike, ski or snowshoe. The refuge is an interesting place in the winter and not many come out to see it.

The staff, contractor and the Friends have all been hard at work on the new auto tour. I would especially like to point out the hard work of our maintenance staff, Kelly C. and Gary for their outstanding work. Also without their help, the Friends volunteer work would be much more difficult. If you have not had a chance to see all that is happening on the auto tour you can check out our

Facebook page. If you are not on Facebook you can still look at it by connect through our link on our website.

Next May will be the Refuge's 75th Anniversary and we and the staff are looking to plan a celebration. We are looking for ideas. Feel free to let me know if you have any thoughts.

I have a few interesting numbers concerning refuges and the Little Pend Oreille NWR. These numbers come from a study that was just released by the FWS called "Banking on Nature." First off: For every \$1 Congress provides in funding to run the National Wildlife Refuge System, almost \$5 on average is returned to local communities. All in all, a very good investment. Locally, visitors to the LPO provide about \$2.2 million in expenditures. The total economic effect of the refuge is about \$3.9 million to the local economy. The last number of interest is the number of visits per year which is now over 64,000 – 64% of the visits are from Spokane and Stevens county.

We are looking for two board members. If you would wish to get involved and learn more about the refuge and the Friends mission please consider joining the board.

As always if you have any question about anything above on any questions about the refuge or the friends you are more than welcome to contact me. Remember that October 15 each year is the time to renew your membership.

Dan Price, President

Refuge Manager's Meandering

I'm writing this on the last day of the modern rifle deer season, signaling the end of the busy season for public use on the refuge. Visitor activity really tapers off from now on until the roads are closed for the winter. Then it's just hearty souls visiting the refuge in the snow until spring begins the cycle again.

The federal government shutdown in October interfered with many people's plans to visit the refuge. Ten refuge employees were furloughed, with just Refuge Law Enforcement Officer Kelly Knutson and I left on duty to protect life and property. We spent much of our time posting signs informing the public that refuge was closed to all uses, and gently shooing visitors away. Most people were disappointed but understanding, although a few left notes on the gates informing us of their displeasure. My favorite note accused us of closing the refuge to the public so it would be private playground for federal employees. If I'd only known that was the reason, I would have had more fun! Less articulate individuals just shot holes in the signs. Unfortunately, not only did the public not have access to their refuge during the shutdown, we lost two weeks of prime working weather for accomplishing some important projects. Let's hope Congress doesn't put us through that again soon.

Speaking of Congress, you've probably heard about our neighbors, the Colville National Forest, providing the U.S. Capitol Christmas Tree this year. We played a small part in that by supplying three much smaller conifer trees that will accompany the Capitol tree on its journey to Washington D.C. Our trees will grace the offices of the Secretary of Interior, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director and the Chief of National Wildlife Refuges. It's pretty cool to have Christmas trees from this refuge on display in our Washington Offices! Progress continues on the new auto tour. The Mill Butte Trailhead kiosk with information sign is installed, along with an accessible outhouse serving visitors stopping at the entrance kiosk and using Mill Butte Trailhead. The old butterfly garden trails were slightly rerouted and paved, and a spur leading to the bluff above the Little Pend Oreille River added. Potter's Pond received a new concrete pad for handicapped parking, and a paved walkway now connects the parking pad with the toilet and fishing dock making the site navigable for visitors with mobility challenges. A wooden viewing deck overlooking the beaver ponds was built along Rookery Road. And the McDowell Lake overlook received a drastic face lift with better parking, a rock walled viewing site with interpretive signs, and a short trail to another overlook closer to the lake.

Volunteers from the Washington Trail Association and Refuge Friends Group put the finishing touches on the new Big Pine hiking trail. The trail is about a half a mile long, and includes a spur to a rock walled view point with an interpretive sign overlooking the Rookery Road beaver ponds. Volunteers from the Friends group are constructing the kiosk at the trailhead that will contain an informational sign.

McDowell Lake and Potter's Pond have been management challenges all summer. Last spring the water control structure (aka the big metal pipe sticking out of the dam) at McDowell Lake, installed in 1972, started leaking, resulting in the lake level dropping by several feet below optimum level. We installed a short term fix we hope will buy us time until we can properly plan the replacement project. One piece of good news is that an underwater survey of the lake failed to find any Eurasian milfoil remaining after our treatment last year to control that noxious invader. Maybe we've finally seen the last of that problem.

Potter's Pond has presented its own set of challenges; in mid-summer it also started losing water. Its water control structure, similar to the one in McDowell Lake but installed in 1960, also failed. These things have been in place for 40 and 50 years respectively and they fail the same summer?! It never rains, it pours. Same story as McDowell, expensive to replace, but we devised a short term fix we hope will buy us time. Unfortunately it required a complete draining of the pond and the loss of the trout it contained. But, we're biologists and need to look at the big picture. The thirty or so fish I saw floating near the shore as the pond drained were gone in two days, eaten by bald eagles, coyotes and whoever else followed their nose. Circle of life, right? We've refilled the pond and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife planted fish that will be ready for catching when the fishing season opens next spring.

If you visit us this fall and winter, watch for signs warning of logging truck traffic. We'll be working on the Pierce-Paulke Wildlife Habitat Management Project, which includes timber thinning and associated log hauling on Bear Creek Road and along Rookery Road. The project will be very active in late fall and all winter, but hopefully finishing up before the gates open on April 14. Over a thousand acres of forest habitat will be enhanced and several miles of roads improved.

The Inland Northwest Refuge Complex Fire Management Officer, Steve Pietroburgo, retired on November 2. Steve came to us from the Bureau of Indian Affairs office in Inchelium about a decade ago. Under his leadership the fire program accomplished thousands of acres of prescribed burning within the complex, developed and nurtured cooperative relationships with neighboring agencies like the Forest Service, Park Service and Washington Department of Natural Resources, all the while stomping out wildfires big and small. Steve's sense of humor made working with him a pleasure for us all. They say you should never retire from something, but to something. Although he's left the government's employ

after 30+ years of service, he plans on spending more time with the ski patrol at 49° North, increasing his aviation school enrollment, and flying over the Refuge in his Piper Commanche.

Jerry Cline, Manager, LPO

Refuge Biologist's Report

As the seasons change, we anticipate the arrival of snow any time now. The leaves are mostly shed and the higher elevations are already turning white. One of the reasons I love the changing of the seasons is that this time is about a lot more than just colder temperatures and shorter days. While secretive wildlife may not be any more easily observed this time of year, sign like tracks are. One of the things I love about fresh fallen snow is to go outside in the morning and take a look around at what sort of critters have been walking around. Will there be tracks of coyotes or deer at the office? Even mouse tracks can be fun to follow. Every track line is like a little detective story trying to determine what the animal was doing. Sometimes the story is more readily apparent than others. For example mouse tracks going across the snow then disappearing right where an owl left the imprint of its wings indicates a mouse that is no more, but an owl may survive the winter. Cougar tracks leading up to the river then crouch marks where its body leaned down indicate an animal that stopped to take a drink. Beaver tracks with drag marks from branches tell still another story of winter preparations or maybe dam repairs. So the next time we get a fresh snowfall take a look around you to see what sort of wildlife is around even if you cannot see a single animal.

It certainly has been an eventful autumn. One of the more exciting projects this fall has been the remote camera project. We have had several remote cameras out in the higher areas of the refuge for several months. This has resulted in documentation of many animals being recorded. Numerous moose have been recorded and a picture of a large bull was on the Facebook page a while back. Other species include both mule and white-tailed deer. Many squirrels and chipmunks were photographed. Of particular interest are the many carnivores that were documented. So far we have captured coyote, black bear, bobcat, and cougar. Probably the most unusual record we have is a handful of pictures of single gray wolves that have been recorded. Whether this was multiple animals or multiple pictures of the same animal is unknown but it is the first proof that a wolf has been on the refuge since

it was established. They appear to have only been passing through for a few days.

Speaking of large mammals, the white-tailed deer are beginning to move back on the refuge for the winter. The Northeast Washington white-tail project is continuing. More than two dozen deer were fitted with radio transmitted over the last two winters. Some of these deer have gone as far as Ione or Usk over on the Pend Oreille River. Still other stayed within a mile or two all year long. This project has already demonstrated how important the refuge is to deer coming from all over the northeast corner of the state. We look forward to another winter of trapping and the continuation of this project for another year.

I hope you all get a chance to come visit the refuge in winter. Winter means a different compliment of wildlife can be seen on the refuge. Many birds have flown south and many of the mammals have gone to hibernation. For some birds though, here in the Inland Northwest is south for the winter. Birds like Rough-legged Hawks come here in good numbers every winter. Some birds which breed here are joined by their northern relatives for the winter. Birds like Red Crossbills or Bald Eagles are in this group. One of the most regular of the northern species to come to the refuge is the Northern Shrike. And speaking of shrikes ...

Critter of the Season



Northern Shrikes (*Lanius excubitor*) are a common winter visitor to the refuge. They are found throughout the northern regions of North America as well as Europe and Asia. The Europeans call them the Great Grey Shrike. Northern Shrikes were named by none other than Carl Linnaeus in his *Systema Naturae* in 1758. This was the first publication to use the now familiar genus and species scientific name for animals. This puts our very own

Northern Shrike in the first group of animals to be so named.

These striking black white and gray birds are about the size of a robin. Shrikes as a group are one of the few truly predatory songbirds. They will hunt large insects, mice, and other songbirds. Northern Shrikes nest in the taiga of northern Canada and Alaska. Taiga is the stunted fir and spruce forest that occurs before you reach the Arctic treeline. They move south and winter as far south as Utah and Nevada. Shrikes are highly adaptable and many a back yard bird feeder has stories of Northern Shrikes learning to stake out bird feeders in search of prey. Northerns like other shrikes are known to cache food by impaling prey items on thorns and for the last hundred or so years on those artificial thorns found on barbed wire fences. This trait has given them the nickname butcher bird for the hanging of meat. Not to be confused with butcherbirds which are an unrelated group of birds in Australia. This prey caching behavior is essential to their survival as shrikes often need to contend with below freezing temperatures much of the winter. Unlike some birds like chickadees, they are not able to lower their body temperature at night so maintaining a temperature over 100° burns a lot of energy during long winter nights making a ready to eat meal first thing in the morning essential. The next time you visit the refuge in winter check out opens areas like the valley around the headquarters for the visitor from the far north.

Mike Munts, Refuge Staff

Fall Wildlife 2013

Now that the modern firearm season for deer is over, hunting pressure and presence will decrease. And in a month's time we will be closing the gates, no longer allowing motorized travel. If you like silence and solitude it is a great time to visit the Refuge and get some exercise. Once the snow covers the ground the Refuge is a great place to explore by skis or snowshoes. You can see where the wild creatures go to feed, bed down and make a kill for a meal.

Mike, our biologist, discovered a new bald eagle nest near the Little Pend Oreille (LPO) River. They fledged one young. One mid-August morning I drove into the parking area at Headquarters and saw 2 bald eagles perched on a snag. It was an adult and a juvenile sitting at the same height on opposite sides of the trunk; neat photo opportunity. We have seen an adult bald eagle perched in the cottonwood tree behind HQ occasionally but not the juvenile eagle. I found a dead deer late Octo-

ber that was being scavenged by ravens and magpies and saw an immature eagle fly out of that area and wondered if it was the bird that hatched this year. Another time I answered the phone in the biologist's office and noticed an adult bald eagle was perched in the cottonwood tree feeding on something. I could see it bend down and tear pieces off whatever it had in its talons and eat it. But there were no binoculars around and by the time I was done with the phone call the eagle was done with its meal. My guess is it was eating a fish it had caught in the LPO River.

Returning from a lunch walk in mid-September, I noticed a hole in the ground rimed with small pebbles. The pebbles were neatly placed around the hole and there was no dirt on top of them. The width of the pebbles circling the hole was about an inch. It was a yellow jacket nest. I walk this section of the Mill Butte Trail often and about a month later I saw the yellow jacket nest had been dug up and the comb scattered- probably by a bear. The hole was about the size of a football. I found another nest that was dug out on the bank of the River.

On another lunch walk I saw a blue-tailed skink officially called a Western skink. Blue (man-made is not my favorite color, but I really like the blue on a Mountain bluebird and on the tail of a skink. The bright blue color is only on young animals and it fades as they age. The tail can be shed when danger is present; I found a blue tail in my flower garden a few months ago. The scales on skinks are very smooth and rounded giving them a glossy appearance. Skink is such an odd word to me. One definition I found is "a smooth bodied lizard with short or absent limbs". A skink is a member of the family Scincidae from the Latin *scincus* which is a derivative of the Greek *skinkos*. The classification of living things is called taxonomy and consists of Domain; Kingdom; Phylum; Class; Order; Family; Genus and Species and some go down to Subspecies. For the Western skink, the taxonomy is as follows: Domain – Eukaryota; Kingdom – Animalia; Phylum - Chordata; Class – Reptilia; Order – Squamata; Family- Scincidae; Genus – *Plestiodon* formerly *Eumeces*; Species – *skiltonianus*. To translate the Western skink is an organism whose cells contain a distinct nucleus; they are an animal with a backbone, cold-blooded. called reptiles, specifically scaled reptiles or lizards of the skink family and their Latin name is *Plestiodon skiltonianus*. Well that's enough Biology- let's get back to sightings.

Have you hiked our new Big Pine Trail yet? It is located on Rookery Road. I got to check it out late September and saw that moose have also discovered it. A moose foot had left a hole in the trail 4 or 5 inches deep. In early November I got to see the new boardwalk and viewing

platform by the beaver ponds on Rookery Road. What a great spot to look for wildlife in the ponds or birds in the trees. Then I noticed large tracks along one side of the boardwalk but couldn't tell what they were until I got off the boardwalk. The tracks were in mud and snow – a moose had come down the hill, crossed Rookery Road and walked along the boardwalk to the edge of the water. I was glad to see this new structure did not deter the moose from getting to where it wanted to go.

Bull moose have been seen in the Beaver Ponds, on Winslow Camp Road and with a cow and calf moose on Berg Lane when the fire crew was doing a prescribed burn nearby. The only report for elk was a bull on Rookery Road. Otters were seen on 2 different days in McDowell Marsh. A hunter reported he saw a cougar with 3 kittens in mid-September – wow that would be a once-in-a-lifetime sighting.

The first snow on the ridge behind Headquarters was November 4 and at Headquarters we got enough snow to track a cat on November 5. I have used that expression “enough snow to track a cat” for years but don't know where it comes from. It means an inch or 2 of snow on the ground.

Another new trail is the paved trail around the pond at Headquarters and down to the cottonwood tree behind Headquarters. It is an accessible trail and there is a new vault toilet next to the pond for your convenience. I did notice that a coyote was walking on the trail and left its scat pile right in the middle of it.

Bird activity has been very quiet. On my walks on Mill Butte Trail I hear chickadees, nuthatches, red crossbills and ravens; occasionally a woodpecker or kinglet. A Northern shrike has been hanging out at Refuge Headquarters- what a striking beautiful bird! This bird has a gray back, black mask, wings and tail and a white underbelly, throat and wing patches. It is more common in our area than the loggerhead shrike which looks very similar. You can see Northern shrikes around here late fall into winter; Loggerhead shrikes are rare summer breeders in our area. Our shrike perches on top of our bird feeder then swoops down to the sidewalk or lawn. I have seen it eating flies but don't know if it is also eating leaf-footed bugs (commonly called stink bugs) which I have seen Western bluebirds eat. The bird is very quick and somewhat leery- with the light on in my office, my movements are very noticeable. Shrikes also cache their food by placing it on thorns or barbed wire fences. They eat small birds, mammals and insects. Clark's nutcrackers have also been observed- another beautiful gray, black and white bird. Their raucous call can be heard from quite a distance.

Now it is your turn to visit the Refuge and stop, look and listen to the wonders all around you.

Barbara Harding, Refuge Staff

In Appreciation.....



Tricia Woods was honored at our annual meeting for her many years of volunteer service on the Refuge and with the Friends. Tricia is a founding member of the Friends of the LPO and served as Board president. Her hard work and dedication helped our organization grow and prosper and we now have nearly 90 members and many worthwhile projects ongoing. Tricia helped launch some of those projects – most notably Education Days – an event she coordinated every spring that brings local area school children to the LPO for a day of learning and fun with volunteers and Refuge staff. Some of the children have never been to the Refuge and Education Days provides a great opportunity for those kids to discover this hidden treasure practically in their own backyard.

Tricia is now retiring from her many official activities with the Friends but she and her husband Fred will find every opportunity to continue to explore and enjoy the LPO.

Fortunately for the future of Education Days, we have a new and able coordinator in Stephanie Wilson. Stephanie is a teacher in the Colville School District and a Friends Board member. Thanks to Stephanie and Tricia for sharing so generously of their time and talents with the Friends and the LPO!

Newsletter Necessities

Number 47 - Jim Groth - Editor

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

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

Calendar

December

11th --Board Meeting, 6:00 p.m.

January

8th --Refuge Bird Count—8:00 a.m.

11th – Board/planning Meeting --9:00 a.m.

February

12th – 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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