



# The Pileated Post

## Quarterly Newsletter Friends of the Little Pend Oreille NWR

Winter 2017

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

Number 63

### From the President

Many people might not be aware of how many different agencies, volunteers and organization cooperate with the refuge staff to study the habitats, wildlife, flora, and history of the refuge. The staff of the Little Pend Oreille has a reputation for being open and easy to work with on many different projects by many different agencies.

For the past three years the refuge has been working with the USFWS Fisheries, out of Leavenworth WA., to monitor the fish species and habitats along the LPO River. Electrofishing is used to monitor fish species. They also check the slope of the river, vegetation along the river and how the thalweg (the meander of the deepest part of the stream) changes over time. This project has also proven be a great educational opportunity for the Youth Conservation Corp (YCC) and our variety of biology interns.

The National Forest Service is another partner. Their Wenatchee office is helping to monitor the growth and success of our white pine planting that we have been doing the past two years in the Blacktail Mt. area. This is great help as we have limited staff and would not be able to do comprehensive monitoring of the white pines.

The Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) has been a partner on a number of projects. For the past two years we have helped the WDFW to trap and band Canada geese in order to better understand changing migration pattern. With a warming climate there is more open water in the north and many geese do not migrate very far. We are trying to determine where the geese living on the refuge during the summer spend their winter months. This

has also been a good learning experience for the YCC, interns and even the staff. It's also a lot of fun!

The WDFW also uses the Little Pend Oreille River as a brood stream for raising native mussels. If you are careful and have a good eye you can spot native mussels along the LPO river.

The WDFW has also used the refuge for a number of other study's including trying to count flamulated owls, the trapping and collaring of white-tailed deer to determine migration patterns and also how predators affect deer behavior. Elk and moose have also been collared for the same predator / ungulate study.

These are just some of the projects the refuge cooperates on. If you would like to learn more you can visit the staff at the refuge or feel free to email me at [bigdan65@yahoo.com](mailto:bigdan65@yahoo.com).

In our next newsletter I will talk about how Friends cooperate with the refuge and other Friends groups.

Don't forget our winter planning meeting on January 20, starting at 9:30 am at the residence home at Refuge headquarters.

### Refuge Manager's Meanderings

It's been a very busy autumn as we rushed to finish a few critical projects before the rain and snow of late fall and winter arrived. Volunteers helped us meet our goal of planting 2500 more western white pine and

western larch seedlings in the Blacktail Mountain Wildlife Habitat Management Unit. Adding these to the 2500 planted last year completed our initial attempt at reestablishing white pine on that site. Our long term goal is to reestablish western white pine on as many appropriate refuge sites as possible. Before the accidental introduction of the non-native white pine blister rust fungus to this area in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, western white pine was a major component of the refuge's forests. But since then the fungus has reduced western white pine to an almost inconsequential component of the forested habitat. This winter we're commercially thinning the Prospect Wildlife Habitat Management Unit, another stronghold for remnant white pine on the refuge, applying a prescription designed to support reestablishment of that species. We're also partnering with our colleagues at the USDA Forest Service Forest Health Protection office in Wenatchee to monitor our restoration efforts on both sites for the next several years to determine if our efforts are successful.

As part of the Refuge's Comprehensive Conservation Management Plan, we maintain a significant number of homesteader-created openings for habitat diversity. Many of these openings are dominated by smooth brome grass. While the grass helps exclude weeds, it is not a native and its value to wildlife is limited. This fall we removed brome grass from about eleven acres adjacent to Sampson Orchard and planted a mix of native grasses and forbs including Idaho fescue, blue bunch wheat grass, blue wild rye, silky lupine and yarrow. Hopefully spring's warming soil temperatures and rain will help these more beneficial species become established.

A couple of minor but interesting habitat improvement projects this fall resulted by taking advantage of unintended consequences. While Potter's Pond was drained for several months during work on the dam we noticed smartweed colonizing the dry pond bottom. Smartweed is a native forb that produces copious amounts of seed much liked by migratory waterfowl and shorebirds. We delayed refilling the pond until the seed ripened to optimize the amount available during fall migration. It seemed to work since more mallards are feeding in Potter's Pond this fall than ever before. However, since we maintain a fish population in the pond year around and trout will be replanted in spring, we won't be able to do it again. The second project involved cattail management at

McDowell Marsh. Drawing down the lake and marsh for two seasons allowed cattails a chance to invade parts of the marsh normally too deep to support them. Optimal marsh habitat contains about a 50:50 ratio of emergent vegetation to open water, but the protracted drawdown created cattail cover approaching 90%. Taking advantage of the dry pond conditions we used a tracked forestry vehicle to knock down the old cattail stems. We'll delay refilling the marsh this fall to expose the roots to freezing, and then rapidly refill the pond in spring.



Planting native grasses and forbs near Sampson Orchard.

**Jerry Cline, Manager, LPO**

## **Refuge Biologist's Report**

Before I get into much else I would like to thank the 13 people who came out in October to plant white pine trees. Thank you for braving the wind and snow. It was a short but still very productive day. We were able to get the rest of the trees in the ground the following week. Another big project we got done this fall was planting the old hay field at Sampson Orchard with native grasses. This is the fourth of the old hay fields we have planted back to natives in recent years. The previous sites have already shown fruit in the form of increased wildlife use. One of the best examples is the increase in deer and elk use of Chester Field.

Here we go into another winter. Here around refuge headquarters the western larch are dropping their needles. The falling needles are like a golden rain softly falling. I drove out to McDowell Marsh this morning and the gold on white was quite a site. Winter is a nice time to visit the refuge. If you are able to come out on a sunny day following fresh snow the scenery can be some of our finest of anytime of the year.

I hope you got to visit the refuge this fall. If you did you may have noticed we have been filling Potter's Pond following the summer of repairs. The smartweed was able to go to seed before the pond was re-filled. This has been a boon to many birds. In October we saw a flock with over 100 American pipits stop by to scarf up the seeds before continuing on their migration. Once the pond started to fill during early November the ducks arrived. Well over a hundred Mallards and smaller numbers of other dabbling ducks have been enjoying the smartweed bounty. In the six and a half years I have been here, I have never seen so many ducks use Potter's Pond in the fall.

Snow is piling up in the mountains and we are starting to see the wildlife respond. White-tailed deer on the move, and dark-eyed junco numbers are picking up. Some other winter birds include mountain chickadees in addition to the year round black-capped. As I write this there are reports of common redpolls, snow buntings, rough-legged hawks, northern shrikes and others in the vicinity of the refuge.

One of the most remarkable finds on the refuge this fall was the sighting of a yellow-billed cuckoo. Cuckoos are one of the rarest birds in Washington. They were somewhat common in parts of Washington during the 1800s. However, since 1950 only about a dozen or so records have been accepted by the Washington Rare Birds committees. As of September two of those records have been on the refuge. Cuckoos are riparian birds, and sightings of them indicate healthy riparian woodlands. We plan to start some survey work for them in the spring. Yellow-billed cuckoos are not only rare but they are a threatened species, so if you are fortunate to encounter one please let us know. Also, please enjoy it from a distance and do not use playback calls or otherwise disturb it.

I hope you all get to come experience your refuge during this winter season. You can enjoy the beauty of fresh fallen snow, maybe learning to identify animal tracks, or maybe see some migrant birds from the far north.

Finally, we are once again doing the refuge winter bird count on Saturday January 6. Please let me know if you are interested in participating or have any questions about it.

### Critter of the Season



Have ever seen Clark's woodpecker? Never heard of it you say? When Lewis and Clark collected the first one in Idaho they called it the black and white woodpecker. It was quickly realized it was really a jay and by the time it was formally named about 10 years later it was called Clark's jay. We now know it as Clark's nutcracker *Nucifraga Columbiana*. That binomial name is literally translated nut lover of the Columbia. The name is appropriate as nearly its entire diet is pine seeds. You may know that birds in the Corvid family like crows, raven, magpies and jays are very intelligent. Because of this high intelligence most species are very adaptable birds which enables them to utilize many types of habitats and food sources. However, the Clark's nutcracker and its close relative the Eurasian nutcracker are the exceptions to that rule. Nutcrackers are among the most specialized

of all bird species. Clark's nutcrackers are limited to the Rocky Mountains and the Cascades. They are known for specializing on whitebark and limber pines, which are high elevation pines that occur in Northeast Washington. They eat other pine seeds and when the whitebark and limber pines don't produce a lot of seed they will wander far and wide in the Inland Northwest. When this happens large numbers may turn up on the refuge. Ponderosa pine is one the main backup species that nutcrackers prefer to forage in when the other two pines don't produce a lot of seed. 2017 was one of those years with many observations of nutcrackers throughout the summer and fall periods.

It is because of the affinity for pines seeds that nutcrackers are so important to their ecosystem. Pine seeds are only available for a short period of time in late summer. So in order to eat year round nutcrackers must cache seeds for later use. Nutcrackers cache 3 to 5 seeds at a time in small crevices or holes in the ground. These are also excellent places to collect water for the seeds to germinate in the spring. This caching behavior is why limber and whitebark pines are so often found in clumps of three or four trees. This is such an effective dispersal method for the trees that those two tree species no longer produced winged seeds in favor of high fat, high protein seeds favored by nutcrackers.

Another important adaptation of nutcrackers to this seed eating is that they nest as early as January. Yes, I said January. They nest in the highest elevations in the coldest time of year. They need to keep eggs at 100 degrees even when the temperatures may be 10, or 20 degrees below zero for weeks at a time. The need to keep the eggs warm for 18-20 days requires the male to incubate when the female needs to feed. It is thought that they nest this early in order for the young birds to reach independence by the time pine seeds are getting ripe in mid-summer so they have time to cache their own food to get through the coming winter. This caching behavior is remarkable. Research in northern Arizona found that nutcrackers could remember more than 25,000 different cache sites where they had stored seeds. They also create mental maps to relocate stored seeds. When a stone or even a potted tree was moved even a few inches the birds had difficulty locating stored seeds.

While large numbers may not turn up every year a few are usually present in ponderosa pine on the refuge. The Mill Butte Trail is a good place to look for them. So I hope you get the opportunity to see and hear the nut lover of the Columbia on the Little Pend Oreille.

**Mike Munts, Refuge Staff**

### **Our Newest Board Member--Joanie Christian**

Joanie has lived in Northeast Washington for over 40 years. She loved having a childhood spent outdoors, and grew up on land bordering LPONWR. Those early experiences were the beginnings of a passion for nature, wildlife, and conservation. She has been an avid photographer since she was in high school, and in the last 5-10 years has focused her photography on wildlife and nature, specifically. Her experience as a photographer has given her an even greater appreciation for wildlife, and a stronger commitment to conservation. She considers herself a student who is always learning, and looks forward to learning as well as serving in her role as a LPONWR board member.

### **Refuge Photo Winners Announced**

The Friends of the Little Pend Oreille National Wildlife Refuge are excited to announce the winners of the 2016-2017 Photo Contest. The winner of the Animal Category is Patricia Ediger with her photo – “Song Sparrow on the Bull Rush;” in the Plant Category is Catherine Lochner with her photo – “Mill Butte Renewal;” in the Scenic Category it is Renee King and her photo – “Sunset Farm Landscape;” and in the Public Use Category it is Joel Anderson's photo – “Heading Out on a Ride.” Thanks to all those who took pictures at the Refuge this past year and entered them in the contest. Thanks to our judge, Joanie Christian, and thanks to the local Colville merchants who continue to support our contest with donations of the prizes.

Remember a new contest started on August 16th and will run until August 15, 2018. Visit the Refuge regularly and be sure and take your camera.

For information about the photo contest you may contact Joel Anderson at 732-4350 or at [onionjoel@gmail.com](mailto:onionjoel@gmail.com)

**Joel Anderson for the FLPO Photo Contest**



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Photos



**Newsletter Necessities**

**Number 63 - Jim Groth - Editor**

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

Editor, *The Pileated Post*

P.O. Box 215, Colville, WA 99114

Email: larchsavage@yahoo.com

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

**Calendar**

**December**

13<sup>th</sup>--Board meeting-- 6:00 p.m.

**January**

6<sup>th</sup>--Winter bird count-- 8:00 a.m.

20<sup>th</sup>—Planning meeting-- 9:30 a.m.

**February**

7<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.

**Friends of the LPO  
Membership Application**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

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Telephone \_\_\_\_\_

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Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Annual Membership**

\_\_\_\_ I would like my newsletter emailed to me

\_\_\_\_ Basic Member \$10 \_\_\_\_\_ New

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\_\_\_\_ Corporate Member \$100

\_\_\_\_ Other \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Please mail, along with a check to:  
Friends of the LPONWR  
Box 215  
Colville, WA 99114

**October is Membership Renewal Month**



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