



Winging It

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Woodpecker Wonderland:

There's a whole lotta flakin' going on in Oregon's eastern Cascades

By Stephen A. Shunk

Nestled in a small spring-fed basin, Cold Springs Campground conjures up visions of the classic storybook forest. A closed canopy of giant pine and aspen trees shelters an open, grassy understory sliced with tiny rivulets that drain the springs into an historic streambed nearby. And what would a forest be without its woodpeckers? Here, in this quiet little campground, the White-headed Woodpecker has an intriguing story to tell.

Welcome to Sisters, Oregon, a quaint little community straddling the boundary between the East Cascades and the High Desert. I moved to this bustling tourist town in 1997 for a job running the local Chamber of Commerce. My first order of business in my new home town was not to unpack or meet the neighbors or chamber members. As an avid birder, I needed to meet the local birds. A tip from another local birder led me to a well-known U.S. Forest Service campground called Cold Springs, just a few miles west of Sisters.

I had seen White-headed Woodpecker a couple times in the Sierra Nevada, but how refreshing it was to find my first Oregon White-headed among the pines at Cold Springs. But I would soon learn that this much-sought species was just the tip of the iceberg. Just above the campground, another small patch of woods was recovering from a recent prescribed burn that had gotten a little

out of hand. In a forest starved for fire, fuels lie in wait. When ignited, on purpose or otherwise, this forest burns hot and fast and easily overwhelms firefighters' ability to suppress or control the burn. In a forest that thrives on fire, burns stimulate natural forest processes. Trees that die in the fire invite wood-boring beetles and the larvae of various other insects. The insects, in turn, invite the woodpeckers.

Over the coming months, I discovered eight species of woodpecker within a quarter mile of Cold Springs. Black-backed Woodpecker joined White-headed, Hairy, and Northern Flicker as the primary foragers in the burn. Red-naped Sapsuckers preferred the aspens in the campground, and Williamson's Sapsuckers divided their time between the pine forest around the burn and the deciduous aspens below. An occasional Downy Woodpecker could be found working willow boughs near the springs, and Red-breasted Sapsucker made an appearance later that fall.

The next spring, I explored the nearby High Desert—the deep canyons, basaltic rimrock, and juniper-sage woodlands and grasslands—and discovered another world of birds, such as Ash-throated and Gray Flycatchers and Rock and Canyon Wrens. This is also the realm of the enigmatic Lewis's Woodpecker. That summer, I ventured higher into the forest above Cold Springs, into the mixed conifer and subalpine zones, where I found Pileated and Three-toed Woodpeckers, plus more Red-breasted and Williamson's Sapsuckers.

(continued on next page)

Center Insert: 2004 ABA Member Proxy Card

Early in 2002, in our quest to study the region's avifauna, a group of local birders coalesced into the East Cascades Bird Conservancy. In the spring and summer of 2003, the Conservancy began formal studies of the woodpecker populations between central Oregon's High Desert and the East Cascades. Large fires in the region had left a mosaic of burns through widely varying forest types. Exploring this habitat diversity led us to the discovery that eleven of Oregon's twelve breeding woodpecker species nested here within just a few miles of each other, a concentration that may be unprecedented in North America. We call this area "Woodpecker Wonderland."

Geography and habitat

The entire eastern slope of the Oregon Cascades boasts tremendous woodpecker diversity, but the Sisters Ranger District of the Deschutes (duh-SHOOTS) National Forest offers particularly easy access to nesting habitat for all eleven species. The greatest concentration of woodpeckers occurs between Sisters and Santiam Pass, fifteen miles east to west, and from the Horn of the Metolius to Trout Creek Swamp, thirty miles north to south. Elevations here range from over 10,000 feet at the summits of Mt. Jefferson and the Three Sisters to less than 2,000 feet where the Metolius River becomes the Metolius Arm of Lake Billy Chinook.

The Cascade Crest forms the western boundary of Woodpecker Wonderland, dipping to less than 5,000 feet at Santiam Pass. McKenzie Pass, eleven miles south of Santiam, bridges the Cascades at just over 5,000 feet. These two gaps in the mountain range may have influenced central Oregon's woodpecker ecology. Areas such as the Meadow Lakes Basin, just east of Santiam Pass, host nesting Pileated Woodpeckers and Red-breasted Sapsuckers, both typical West Cascades species that appear to have overflowed into these east-side habitats. (This overflow concept is supported by the fact that other west-side species, such as Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Ruffed Grouse, and Winter Wren, also breed just east of Cascade gaps.)

Two primary watersheds define the region: the Metolius in the north and Squaw Creek in the south, both of which set

the stage for tremendous forest diversity and a plethora of woodpeckers. Annual precipitation at the alpine summits of the Three Sisters tops out at more than 140 inches (rain equivalent), while the juniper woodlands outside the town of Sisters, a mere fifteen miles from the crest, receive less than a foot of rain per year. This may be one of the

steepest precipitation gradients in the world. Up to sixty percent of this precipitation percolates down through the region's volcanic soils. The extreme rainfall gradient and the well-drained soils support a host of forest types. Subalpine fir, mountain hemlock, and lodgepole pine dominate subalpine forests at higher elevations. Below the subalpine zone, mixed conifer forest includes Douglas-fir, true firs, western larch, and various cedars. As the precipitation wanes at lower elevations, Ponderosa pine takes over, followed by western juniper at the edge of the sagebrush desert. Throughout the region, riparian corridors lined with aspen, alder, and willow carve through the lava sands, adding to the region's diversity.



A weak excavator that feeds primarily by "flycatching" or sallying, Lewis's Woodpecker nests mainly in old cavities excavated by other woodpeckers. An urgent conservation priority in central Oregon, Lewis's Woodpecker stands to gain from studies of its preferences in artificial nesting cavities. Photo: Kris Falco/Horsewings

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- The American Birding Association aims to inspire all people to enjoy and protect wild birds.
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- The ABA's education programs promote birding skills, ornithological knowledge, and the development of a conservation ethic.
- The ABA encourages birders to apply their skills to help conserve birds and their habitats, and we represent the interests of birders in planning and legislative arenas.
- ABA Sales, the ABA's for-profit subsidiary, supplies birders with tools, equipment, and accessories to make their birding more enjoyable.

We welcome all birders as members.

Metolius Basin

The Metolius Basin can be broken into three primary sub-regions: Lake Creek, West Basin, and the Green Ridge Slope. Lake Creek receives most of its water from the tiny Suttle Lake subwatershed, which speaks of active glacial influence. Suttle Lake itself is far from tiny. At a mile and half long and nearly a mile wide, this deep fjord is the largest lake in Woodpecker Wonderland (attracting much more than woodpeckers—but that’s another story).

Link Creek flows into Suttle Lake’s west end, draining Cache Mountain and the Meadow Lakes Basin. The mature forest in this bowl hosts multiple Pileated Woodpeckers, and Red-breasted Sapsuckers breed annually around Meadow Lake itself. This upper Suttle Lake region was nearly completely consumed by two fires in the summers of 2002 and 2003, the Cache Mountain and Link fires, the former of which has already proven to be extremely productive for woodpeckers, drawing Black-backs eastward and stretching the western breeding limit of the Gray Flycatcher into its moonscape of charbroiled trees.

South of Suttle Lake, the Cache Creek subwatershed drains an amazingly diverse forest, which includes one of the region’s most productive small burns, aptly named the Cache Creek Burn, from the summer of 2001. The forest around the Cache Creek Burn may represent the southern limit of the

region’s Three-toed Woodpeckers. Also found here are nesting Black-backed and Pileated Woodpeckers, as well as Williamson’s Sapsuckers. Suttle Lake and Cache Creek both drain into Lake Creek, the first major stream to reach the Metolius River below its magical headwater springs. (The Metolius River attests to the region’s active system of

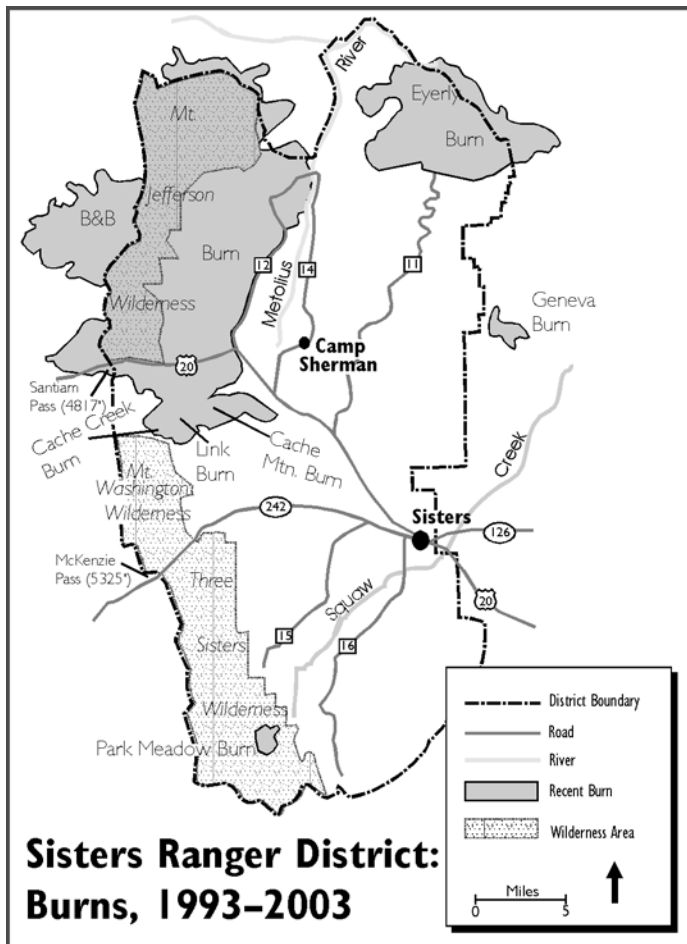


Arguably the most difficult woodpecker for a birder to tally in the Lower 48 states, Three-toed Woodpeckers in Oregon’s eastern Cascades associate most strongly with relatively recent burns in subalpine lodgepole pine forest. Photo: KevinSmithNaturePhotos.com

underground lava tubes. These underground rivers carry up to 600 cubic feet per second of percolated water “downstream,” eventually reaching the Deschutes River through hundreds of springs.)

The West Metolius Basin is dissected by a series of streams that flow eastward and nearly parallel to each other from the Cascades Crest into the northbound reach of the Metolius River. The subalpine zone at the heads of these creeks, and the lodgepole pine stands in particular, host the region’s highest concentration of Three-toed Woodpecker. In the summer of 2003, this entire section of the Metolius Basin experienced the largest burn in recent years in all of the Cascades, when the 90,000-acre B&B fire engulfed the overfueled forest. Summer 2004 will be our first opportunity to explore this magnificent burn and to document its use by the region’s woodpeckers. The West Metolius Basin is also home to the region’s highest concentration of White-headed Woodpeckers, whose preferred habitat in the Ponderosa pine forest was largely spared in the B&B Burn.

The monolithic Green Ridge separates the West Metolius Basin from a high, sloped plateau that pours into the Metolius Arm of Lake Billy Chinook. Green Ridge, looming some 2,000 feet over the town of Camp Sherman, squeezes most of the eastbound moisture into the western half of the basin, so its eastern slope gets very little rain. On the Green Ridge Slope, a narrow band of mixed conifer forest gives way to a wide swath of mixed Ponderosa pine and incense cedar before reaching the juniper belt and the Crooked River National Grasslands. Another major fire, the 20,000-acre Eyerly (EYE-er-lee) Burn in summer 2002, left the Green Ridge Slope



severely charred, among the most intense burns in the West that summer. After one summer surveying woodpeckers in the Eyerly Burn, the East Cascades Bird Conservancy has documented what may be the easternmost breeding Pileated and Black-backed Woodpeckers in the Cascades.

Squaw Creek and Indian Ford

The southern half of Woodpecker Wonderland lies in the Squaw Creek Watershed (soon to receive a name more in line with current sensibilities). Black-backed Woodpeckers breed alongside Williamson's Sapsuckers near the headwaters of Squaw Creek itself, at the base of 9,000-foot Broken Top near Three Creek Lake. A couple thousand feet below, where the Ponderosa pine belt begins, White-headed Woodpeckers abound, and Indian Ford Creek flows from profuse springs into a series of productive meadows. The mature aspen, alder, and willow stands around Glaze Meadow, Big Meadow, Black Butte Swamp, and Indian Ford Meadow likely host the region's highest concentration of Red-naped Sapsucker and Downy Woodpecker.

Other key habitats in the Squaw Creek region include Trout Creek Swamp, a stronghold for Pileated Woodpecker and Williamson's Sapsucker; Camp Polk Meadow, a 140-acre preserve northwest of Sisters that has hosted eight woodpecker species; and Alder Springs in the Crooked River National Grasslands, an area surrounded by nesting Lewis's Woodpeckers. And then there is Cold Springs Campground. Eight species of woodpecker continue to be reported from Cold Springs, and it is one of the best spots in the region to find hybrid Red-breasted x Red-naped Sapsuckers.

Visiting Woodpecker Wonderland

Camp Sherman, an idyllic little village on the banks of the Metolius River, may be the best base for exploring the region. Camp Sherman has plenty of camping and lodging, a country store, a four-star restaurant, bike rentals, and world-class fly-fishing. White-headed Woodpeckers can be seen and heard all around town, American Dippers cavort in the river, and Vaux's Swifts course the airways overhead. This delightful town also allows quick access to both the B&B and Eyerly Burns. Numerous other Forest Service campgrounds invite the curious birder into the Metolius Basin. Jack Creek Campground is home to Hammond's Flycatcher, Western Tanager, Hermit and Townsend's warbler (as well as hybrids), and at least four species of woodpecker. A useful web resource for learning more about Camp Sherman and the Metolius Basin is at <www.metoliusriver.com>.

Cold Springs Campground, four miles west of Sisters, also ranks among the best birding campgrounds, although in very dry years, the springs and drinking well run dry. Chain motels and many small inns can be found in the Sisters area. Aspen Meadow Lodge, (541) 549-4312, just a mile east of Sisters, sits right on Squaw Creek, with Pygmy Nuthatch, White-headed Woodpecker, and Red-breasted Sapsucker among its regular visitors. A little planning will prevent the surprise of inordinately large crowds in Sisters. The town is

not necessarily to be avoided on event weekends, since most of the birding is well away from the hoopla, but visiting birders should be prepared. On the web at <www.sisterschamber.org>, the Sisters Chamber posts the dates of big event weekends such as the Sisters Outdoor Quilt Show (biggest in the world) and the Sisters Rodeo.

The best resource for birding in the region is the trail guide to the Oregon Cascades Birding Trail. The entire guide is available on-line at <www.oregonbirdingtrails.org>, and printed copies may be requested from Paradise Birding through the author (contact information appears below). The ABA is currently working on a new birding guide to Oregon that will help direct visiting birders in the region, but the publication date is a year or two out. Exploring the area is also best accomplished with the Sisters Ranger District Fire Map, available for \$3.00 at the Sisters Ranger Station, (541) 549-7700, or Bend Mapping and Blueprint, (541) 389-7440.

Thanks to Kris Hennings of the Sisters Ranger District, Deschutes National Forest, for map-making assistance.

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Sought after by birders for its limited distribution, relative rarity, and stunning good looks, the White-headed Woodpecker stands out within its subfamily for its habit of foraging primarily on live wood and unopened pine cones. Look for it in stands of large Ponderosa pine. Photo: Steve Shunk/Paradise Birding

Woodpecker Conservation in Central Oregon

Many of central Oregon's nesting woodpeckers display highly specific ecological requirements, and the decline or deterioration of the forest types that woodpeckers depend on poses conservation challenges throughout the region. Coordinated monitoring efforts are crucial for learning how woodpecker populations respond to changes in a forest—basic knowledge for managing and conserving both the birds and their habitats. In 2004, the East Cascades Bird Conservancy (ECBC) will continue to document post-fire return intervals of woodpeckers and other cavity nesters in the 2002 Eyerly Burn (see accompanying article). Additional funding from the U.S. Forest Service will allow the project to expand into the 90,000-acre B&B Burn of summer 2003.

One woodpecker species of particular concern in central Oregon is Lewis's. The exclusion of fire in its High Desert nesting habitat tends to limit the availability of natural cavities. Yet little information exists on Lewis's Woodpeckers' use of artificial nest structures. The ECBC will soon enter its second year of a nestbox study involving this critically sensitive species. Volunteers hope to document placement, entrance size, and interior dimension preferences so that future efforts can focus on successful box installation and monitoring.

The charismatic White-headed Woodpecker (*Picoides albolarvatus*) represents another precarious *Picinae* population in central Oregon. Ponderosa pine forests in the East Cascades sustain an unusually dense concentration of this woodpecker, but the waning health of this obligatory habitat is making life increasingly difficult for these highly specialized birds.

Two key ecological traits distinguish White-headed from other North American woodpeckers. First, more than ninety percent of the foraging this species does takes place on the bark of live trees. (Most other woodpeckers, of course, focus their foraging on dead or dying wood.) White-headed rarely drill into or through the bark, flaking it off instead to expose prey items. Second, through the fall and winter this woodpecker makes its living mainly by drilling the seeds out of large, unopened pine cones.

"Big pine is important to these birds", explains Dr. Richard Frenzel. "They need the big surface areas for insects, and mature trees are the best cone producers". Ponderosa pine provides a very consistent cone crop at lower elevations, such as in the Metolius Basin. But most of the large pines that are best for this woodpecker were removed decades ago as accessible, high-value timber.

Fire suppression also threatens *P. albolarvatus* in central Oregon. This woodpecker's preferred habitat traditionally experienced ground-clearing understory fires every decade or so. In the early twentieth century, fire suppression became a way of life, and forests accumulated downed wood and shrub density. Accipiters formerly posed the woodpecker's primary threat, but other predators have burgeoned in this new, more cluttered forest type: the yellow-pine chipmunk benefits from increased shrub cover, and the golden-mantled ground-squirrel thrives on forest floors covered with downed wood. Frenzel sees woodpecker occupancy rates falling as the understory grows thicker. "The occupancy of known territories has dropped at least five percent per year since 1998", says Frenzel, "and the highest cause of nesting failure is mammalian predation".

Dr. Frenzel believes the U.S. Forest Service may now be using his data as part of the ecological justification for prescribed burning in central Oregon, with some burning prescriptions being written specifically for White-headed Woodpecker. But the current prescriptions in the Metolius Basin may be "condemning the birds to a habitat sink where [forest] openings are an ecological trap", he explained. "If we could get the forest back to a healthy position, the openings would create themselves," Frenzel summarized. "But nothing stays the same, and we can't change it back".

— Stephen A. Shunk

Milestones

- For the first time in thirty-seven years of birding, **Mike** and **Joy Bowen**, of Bethesda, Maryland, tallied 1,000 World species in a calendar year. Mike spotted a sneaky Sprague's Pipit near Mission, Texas, while Joy's "milestone" came in the form of a shy Olive Sparrow at Laguna Atascosa NWR. Trips to Europe, Latin American, and the 2003 ABA Convention in Oregon all helped the Bowsens reach the mark.

- Celebrating his 60th birthday, **Steve Strawbridge**, of Gladwyne, Pennsylvania, went to Kenya for two weeks with his wife, netting 277 new species and bringing his World list to 899. It was a Long-eared Owl, close to home in Chester County, Pennsylvania, that pushed Steve to the 900 mark.

- Nearly every bird was a lifer for **Joyce Meyer**, or Woodinville, Washington, as she birded Australia from Darwin to Tasmania. A Cape Barren Goose on Philip Island was the 3,000th World bird for Joyce, who finished the trip at 3,128.

- Also reaching the 3,000 mark was **Linda Beuret**, of Santa Barbara, California, who spotted a Snow-capped Manakin while on a tour in Rodonia to reach her "milestone".

- Visiting his son in Seattle, Washington, **John F. Wells, Jr.**, of Riverside, Connecticut, saw a Ross's Goose for his 600th ABA-area species.