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Eye on the Environment

Great Bird Watching Begins In Winter

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Winter is a good time to hone our local bird lore. Our intrepid winter residents are active and easy to spot after the leaves of the deciduous trees have fallen. Winter birds keep busy consuming calories and finding mates long after the summer flocks have flown.

I interviewed Mike Palladini to get a few stories of winter bird watching, with an eye to learning more about our year-round residents. Mike works for Swan Ecosystem Center as a forest steward, helping people restore wetlands and develop stewardship plans. Mike has a Master's degree in wildlife biology, with birds as his specialty.

Clues to bird behavior can be found in the snow. Mike advises looking for the delicate wing prints of spruce, blue, and ruffed grouse where they have emerged from roosting burrows under the snow. You might also come across larger wingtip prints, talon tracks, and scarlet drops of blood indicating a northern goshawk has recently preyed on a grouse that just emerged from its burrow.

I once saw what looked like the tracks of an eagle pack covering about a tenth of an acre. This was a puzzle, since eagles are usually solitary hunters. After much head scratching, I finally realized a rafter (look it up) of wild turkeys had passed through. The tracks of both are large (5-6 inches) and show the fourth toe, called a hallux, pointing backwards. Eagles use the hallux for gripping prey and grasping onto roosting branches, similar to the way we grip and pinch with our thumbs and forefingers.

American dippers maintain pair bonds and often their breeding territories through winter. Volunteers who regularly count birds in the Swan Valley know to check the same reaches of the Swan River and its side creeks during each count, looking for the resident pair.

Dippers often secure their elaborate nests to the underside of bridges if no rock ledges are available. They may occupy several hundred yards of stream. If their creek ices over, dippers will move to larger streams and divide the available territory among many other pairs. Mike recently observed dipper pairs evenly spaced along Yellowstone's Lamar River as if they had fairly measured their allotted reaches.

Dippers are one of the few species you may hear singing in the Swan Valley during the winter months. John Muir wrote in 1894, "*[H]is music is that of streams refined and spiritualized. The deep booming of the falls are in it, the trills of the rapids, the gurgling of the margin eddies, the low whispering of the level reaches, and the sweet tinkling of separate drops oozing from the ends of mosses and falling into tranquil ponds.*"

The hearty dippers dive to the bottom of icy streams to forage for insects, insect larvae and small fish. Unlike many winter residents, dippers eat live food day in and day out, while other birds make a living in winter by storing seeds to consume later. Nuthatches can often be spotted tucking seeds into the bark of tree trunks to dig out in times of need.

Pine grosbeaks sing a sweet, cheery song in winter that may surprise you on a snowshoe tramp. Described in scientific journals as "unwary," these bright birds (males have red heads and backs, females have yellow coloring) may be spotted singing overhead in nearby trees, in no hurry to fly off.

Fat is an important food source for Stellar's jays, gray jays, chickadees, ravens, eagles, turkey vultures, and downy and hairy woodpeckers. If you observe the birds at a carcass, the white fat is selected before the red meat. Ravens can often be seen carting away hunks of fat in their beaks.

More species of owl occur in Montana than any other state. Of the fifteen species found in Montana, several overwinter in Northwest Montana—western screech owl, great horned owl, barred owl, great grey owl, northern hawk owl, long-eared owl, northern saw whet owl, boreal owl, and northern pygmy owl.

Great gray owls may form pairs as early as January and lay eggs in March. They often take over abandoned osprey or raven nests, or build their own in mistletoe brooms or on broken-topped snags. Look for great grays along the edges of forests near openings. You might spot a large divot with wing tip marks on either side where a great gray has snatched a rodent from the middle of a snowy meadow.

Snowy owls are irregular winter visitors that have sometimes been seen in the Swan looking at first glance like bulky seagulls darting low over open ground, their bright feathers startling white against a dark evergreen background.

Our road-killed deer provide easy eagle viewing. If you can pull off the highway safely, have work gloves in the car and a strong back, and don't mind handling a dead animal, you may consider taking a minute to pull road-kill away from the highway. Unfortunately, we lose some of our majestic avian creatures to vehicle strikes each year. Full-bellied eagles are slow to take off over the road and like jumbo jets need a long runway compared to ravens, which represent the black helicopters of our raptor fleet.

Look for all three North American accipiters—sharp-shinned hawk, Cooper's hawk and northern goshawk—zooming at lightning speed through the forest understory after small birds and mammals to eat. They fly so fast when you try to identify which of the three species you've seen, they're gone.

As winter sets in Northwest Montana, breeding red-tailed hawks migrate out of our area and are replaced by wintering rough-legged hawks. These beautiful broad-winged hawks can be distinguished from their red-tailed relatives by their lighter head, shorter wings, black "wrist" patch, and white strip at the base of the tail.

Look for large flocks of common redpolls and snow buntings drawn to our roads to forage on weed seeds. Unlike many breeding birds that travel north to the Swan from wintering grounds in the southern United States and Central America, these species travel from their breeding grounds in the arctic to winter in the valley.

Speaking of birds like redpolls and snow buntings that take advantage of human development, pileated woodpeckers can make a living at stump demolition. If you are not in a hurry (have decades to spare) you can forego hiring a crew to blow up your stumps. Let the pileateds in their red caps take your stumps apart one chip at a time as they hammer out their rectangular holes in search of insects and larvae.

These are just some of the great winter bird watching opportunities that people who winter in the Swan can look for. "Even if you aren't inclined toward observing birds, it's tough not to respect the ability of these hearty animals to make a living through our harsh Montana winters," Mike said.