

Portneuf Valley Audubon Society News

May 2018, Vol. 45, #9

PVAS website: <http://pvaudubon.org>

Facebook: Portneuf Valley Audubon Society

PO Box 32, Pocatello, ID 83204-0032

May 17, Thursday, Monthly Meeting Members' Photos and Fun

Time: 7 p.m.

**Where: Marshall Public Library
Community Room.**

Bring your favorite photos, stories and finger foods to share with other members.

It's a chance to celebrate all of our good birding from the year past and for the year to come.

May 19, Saturday, Field Trip

American Falls Family Birding Festival

Meet to carpool to this family-orientated event at 8:30 a.m. in the lower ISU Campus parking lot by the Bison Sculpture behind the Idaho Museum of Natural History Building (5th and Dillon).

The American Falls Family Bird Festival provides participants the opportunity to view a wide variety of birds normally seen in South Eastern Idaho. The date of the festival is timed to overlap wintering birds and the beginning of spring migration. The schedule

- 9:30- noon – Carpool to Hatchery Audubon Trail featuring speakers and guided birding.
- Noon to 1 p.m. – No host lunch at the La Esperanza, featuring speakers and prizes.
- 1-3 p.m. – Owl and shorebirds at the American Falls Reservoir

For more festival information visit <http://afbirdingfestival.us>.

June 2, PVAS Birdathon Fundraiser Mark your calendar

Please show your support for the Portneuf Valley Audubon Society (PVAS) by participating in our Birdathon in any way that suits you!

This is our chapter's only yearly fundraiser. We depend upon financial donations to provide continuing educational information to the public and to contribute to projects that support the birds and their environment.

Chuck Trost will send out letters and pledge forms for his efforts, but PVAS members are encouraged to do their own Birdathon and collect pledges to add to the total. Think about birding in your backyard, riding a bike down the Portneuf Greenway, walking your favorite trail or birding a local waterway.

Contact Chuck Trost at 233-4538 or Barb North at 208-406-8507 if you'd like to participate or donate to this year's PVAS Birdathon.

June 3, Sunday, Hummingbird Roundup

RUDEEN RANCH, Open 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

<http://idahoptv.org/outdoors/shows/birdersbandersbinoculars/hummingbirds.cfm>

We will drive up to this beautiful ranch and watch hundreds of hummingbirds of three species swarm the feeders, and potentially you may release a hummer from your hand.

This is a fun event for kids, and is educational for all. Bring a friend and some kids. We'll be home by 1 p.m.

Carpool: Meet by 10:00 a.m. in the lower ISU Campus parking lot by the Bison Sculpture behind the Idaho Museum of Natural History Building (5th and Dillon).

Questions? Contact Trost: 233-4538; more info: <http://hummingbirdroundup.com/>

June 10, Birdathon Summer Celebration Potluck

COMPILE COUNTS TIME: 2:00 p.m.

DINNER TIME: 3:00 p.m., approximately

PLACE: U.S. Forest Service Mink Creek Group Site (past the Guard Station and 2 1/2 miles south of Cherry Springs).

PVAS will provide a ham and utensils. Please bring a potluck item to share.

We will conduct the final tally of birds for the Birdathon, and award prizes for most birds found and closest guess to the total.

July 21, Saturday, Cassia Crossbill Fieldtrip

Come Join PVAS to Look for Idaho's Newest (and unique) Bird Species

Meet at 8 a.m. in the lower ISU Campus parking lot by the Bison Sculpture behind the Idaho Museum of Natural History Building (5th and Dillon). Idaho State University Emeritus Professor of Ornithology Chuck Trost will lead this trip.

Plan to join us to see Idaho's only endemic bird species, the Cassia Crossbill! We will carpool for a trip up Mt. Harrison, south of Oakley.

There are no squirrels in the South Hills, and this resident crossbill has evolved to open Lodgepole pine cones that have become thicker without competition from squirrels.

We will be joined by the Native Plant Society folks, as well as people from as far away as Boston to see this "lifer!" Bring a lunch and a friend. We'll be home by mid-afternoon.

August 12-13, Weekend Field Trip to Squirrel Meadows Cabin and Surrounding Spots

Trip to measure loon productivity south of Yellowstone National Park.

We have rented the Squirrel Meadows cabin off of Flag Ranch Rd, east of Ashton. We plan to have two evening Dutch Oven Cookouts. So bring your breakfasts and lunches, as well as beverages.

We will survey several lakes for loon productivity. The cabin sleeps about six, but you can camp in your car or a tent. Remember, this is bear country, so bring bear spray.

August 18, Bear River Refuge or American Falls Reservoir Field Trip

Shorebird migration!

Meet to carpool to this family-orientated event at 8 a.m. in the lower ISU Campus parking lot by the Bison Sculpture behind the Idaho Museum of Natural History Building (5th and Dillon).

We will carpool, either to Bear River Bird Refuge in Utah, or to American Falls Reservoir, depending on which has the most of these long distant migrants.

You can call Chuck Trost at 208-233-4538 to find the latest plans. Meanwhile, have a great summer!

April 14 Field Trip Report Sage Grouse, Loon Trip

Seven of us made an early morning trip to a Sage Grouse lek below Rockland. Many males were displaying, but a Golden Eagle flyover caused massive dispersal, and the show was over.

We stopped at a Ferruginous Hawk nest near Holbrook, but only saw the female's eye looking back at us from close range.

Then on Devil's Creek Reservoir we saw 12 Common Loons and flocks of Eared Grebes.

Pelicans and Blue-footed Boobies

Essay by Jackie Johnson Maughan

This initially appeared in Backcountry Blend, Blue Scarab Press, 2005, which has copyright.

I paid \$7000 to see a Blue-footed Boobie what with travel insurance, air fare, and a cabin on our adventure travel tour of the Galapagos Islands. My husband paid the same of course, but his objective was not as narrow as mine.

If you average it out only by bird species—albatross, Flightless Cormorant, penguin, flamingo, frigate bird, pelican, for example, it comes to about \$125 each. This does not count all the little brown finches that made Darwin famous. But Ralph, my husband, was most impressed by the Waved Albatross and the Brown Pelican. Fifty years ago the Brown Pelican was close to extinct because of broad spectrum insecticides such as DDT. But now it is making a comeback, something we did not know till we saw so many of them in the Galapagos. There is an irony here because Ecuador itself is a heavy user and manufacturer of DDT.

We do have Brown Pelicans in my part of the world. I

have seen them on the lakes in Yellowstone although they are salt water birds and only get here by accident. Perhaps they take a wrong turn at the mouth of the Columbia instead of continuing north. The Columbia River is eight miles where it meets the sea and by right and following the shoreline, you could end up in Yellowstone.

It took Lewis and Clark a month—lost, hungry, cold—before they figured out where the Columbia ends and the Pacific Ocean begins.

Unusual as Brown Pelicans are to my eye, they never struck me as terribly impressive, at least not compared to the white pelican which lives and breeds in our high desert country and is not accidental at all. Now here is a bird which should have some other name – like Magnificent Great White Alabaster Phoenix. But I will get to that later.

American White Pelicans do migrate, but not like the Brown Pelican which has these little stubby wings but still huffs it 4000 miles up and down the coast while the white hardly makes it past Mexico. Why the Brown Pelican travels so far is probably less a function of character than of necessity as what I saw the last day of our trip helps illustrate.

The Galapagos are part of Ecuador and the people who live there seem to be better off than those on the mainland, and so does the wildlife. Because of the islands' international fame, endemic land and marine species are more protected. Harvesting tortoises and green turtles is illegal. So is shark finning (skinning the shark of its fins then throwing it back in the water). While fishing is the major source of income, cruise lines bring not just tourists but dollars thanks to government regulations. Guides and naturalists as a rule must be Ecuadorian citizens. On our ship, all of them were from the Galapagos. So were the housekeepers and boatmen. Everyone else, from captain down to dishwasher, was from Ecuador.

Our cruise (Linblad) was a small one with heavy emphasis on education and conservation. In fact, our guides were so protective of the islands that they scolded passengers from other ships for getting too close to the wildlife. Then they went and scolded the guides too.

Animals, like sea lions and iguanas and the Galapagos Mockingbird, are so tame you can walk right up to them. And cruise ships can only land so many people at so many places at so many times of day and year and all must be accompanied by guides. That is why the animals are so tame you can touch them. But Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death if Ramiro or Rafael or Gabriel sees you.

We were ten days at sea and the way our time went like this: snorkel in the morning, siesta, and then hike in the afternoon. Our four Zodiacs would be lowered into the water and from these we made our landings.

On one particular late afternoon, our ship was anchored off Espanola Island near Punta Suarez. Punta Suarez is a long spit of lava which curves out into the Pacific like an arm. It is the southernmost point of the southernmost island in the Galapagos. Keep going south and you will not hit land till Antarctica. The cold Humboldt Current hammers away at the point from the south, and the warm equatorial currents push into the curve of the arm from the west.

It was just me on the bridge deck with my binoculars, my good ones. Everyone else had gone ashore to hike in to see the colony of Waved Albatross. Late afternoon is what I call bird happy hour. This is when they feed the most heavily and you can see the most action. This is true from a 9,500 foot ridge in the Idaho wilderness to a zero foot reef off the coast of a Galapagos volcano.

I was scanning the point of the lava spit for activity, my elbows propped against the rail, the sun lowering behind me. There seemed to be some kind of commotion, more than I would expect even at happy hour.

The Brown Pelicans perch on the cliffs waiting for the fish to come in with the tide. The fish follow the krill and plankton and these are extremely prolific here because of the converging arctic and tropic currents. The Brown Pelicans, which look like really, really fat little old men who need galluses to hold up their trousers, require cliffs high enough to dive and get a good speed up and water deep enough that they don't split their skulls open on the bottom. They snag the fish underwater, which seems like work enough, but then they must swim to the surface to swallow it. Not only that, the fish must be facing the right way. It must go in head first, not sideways or backwards, or the fins and spines and scales will catch in the pelican's gullet and choke it to death. So the pelicans must swim to the top

of the water and flip the fish up in the air to get it faced in the correct direction in order to eat it.

As the pelicans fished, the frigate birds cruised above as usual. Frigate birds are so common in the Galapagos that you get used to them like people in Anchorage get used to Bald Eagles. But they have never done a day's work in their lives. In fact, it has been so long since any of them caught an honest fish that their oil glands hardly function anymore.

So they swoop and glide, swoop and glide, with their narrow beaks longer than their bodies and their wings longer still. And they were stealing fish from the Brown Pelicans. They are so good at this that they hardly get their beaks wet. And that is what I was seeing, four or five frigate birds for every pelican.

While the Brown Pelicans do not dress to kill or even go to the dance, I would sure rather have them live next door to me. They space themselves within eyeball distance of each other, but that's it. Why they do not band together to drive out the frigate birds, I do not know. But it does make me wonder how they ever get a girl let alone mate and have offspring.

The first time I ever saw a white pelican it was in flight, cruising down-river so close to the water it could have put its toes in. This was on the Blackfoot River in southeastern Idaho. This section of the Blackfoot is in pretty good shape and the rushes and sedges grow dark green and high along the banks. And here is the remarkable thing: the bird's wingspan is so great that the tips almost touched the green on either side of the river. I thought I was seeing a condor, a white one with beautiful black feathers on the edge of its wings. Later when I found out what it was, I decided it should not just be named American White Pelican but should have the word "magnificent" or at least "great" attached to it.

I knew this already, but other birders on the cruise confirmed it: seeing an American White Pelican is an enviable event, let alone having them breed and live a puddle-jump away. Unlike the Brown Pelican, the whites are not making a comeback, at least not in the western U.S. Their numbers are down but stable, whatever that means.

Where I live is part of the Great Basin. This means that rivers and lakes do not drain into the sea. Instead, water sinks into the earth's crust. The land is high, dry, and mineralized. The Great Basin curves like a scythe across the western U.S. through Oregon, Nevada, Utah and up along the border of Idaho. Lakes and reservoirs are really more like evaporation ponds. But that is what the white pelicans seem to like: the marshy backwater of the Great Salt Lake, the wetland sumps of the Hart Mountain Antelope Refuge, the silted reservoir above the Blackfoot River.

This is no accident. My observation is that they like bottom-feeding fish like carp. And these fish live in warmer, dirtier water than, say, a trout. But it cannot be just any old muddy water. It has to be brackish or salty and that is why the Great Basin. Since the white pelicans nest on the ground, the habitat also must have islands or some other feature that makes it so predators either cannot get to them or cannot live there. This is true of the Brown Pelican too, which is why they do so well in the Galapagos. There are not any native mammals like bears or coyotes. In addition, pigs and goats and dogs are slowly being eradicated from some of the uninhabited islands like Espanola. This has been an international effort and the Charles Darwin Society has been a major player.

As I mentioned, the American White Pelicans do not migrate as far as the Brown Pelicans in spite of their nine-foot wingspan. The thieving frigate birds are an indicator of why the browns don't just sit fat and happy in the Galapagos. If they vacate their nests for a few months every year, this throws off the frigates and other pests.

But there is more to this story. I have never seen any creature, bird or otherwise, hassle the American White Pelicans, and it is not just because they are so big. Unlike the brown pelicans, the whites cooperate. For example, they fish in groups.

It is the strangest thing to watch. My friend Janne and I were down on the Bear River Refuge near the Great Salt Lake. There were white pelicans everywhere. The adults grow this big orange comb on their beaks when they are ready to mate. It looks sort of like a flag sticking up there. We saw plenty of these adults, but it was the subadults that showed us what it is all about.

The youngsters look pretty much like the adults except they don't have big, orange scabs on their beaks. Not only that, they have a cool, black mohawk of feathers on top of their heads. Janne and I watched seven or eight of them get in a circle. They would face each other, stick their heads in the water, shake their heads back and forth, then take their heads out of the water, and then do the same routine all over again. Turns out they were herding carp, cooperative fishing. But they looked silly as hell, like punk rockers doing the Hokey Pokey.

Which gets back to the Blue-footed Boobie. Imagine if you had legs that ended at your knees and a body shaped like an upside-down lightbulb. Add to this a pair of neon blue clown feet. You're trying to get a girl, and the girls like these big, blue feet. Of course, they have big, blue feet too, but some are better than others. Anyway, you use guano to mark out your turf which is really just a circle you have drawn on the rocks. And you dance. You put your right foot in. You put your right foot out. You put your right foot in, and you shake it all about.

And the girls come, \$7000 worth, all the way from Idaho.

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MAKE YOUR CHECK PAYABLE TO THE NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY.

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225 Varick Street, 7th Floor
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