Walla Walla's Yellow-crowned Night-Heron causes brief crisis of confidence

By Jim Nestler and Mike Denny

On May 30, 1993 Jim Nestler received a phone call at 6:45 p.m. from Connie and Charles Sherer. They said that a strange bird was walking along Yellowhawk Creek in Walla Walla, and they thought the bird might be a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron. They wanted a more experienced birder to verify their identification.

Jim immediately went to the Sherer's home and saw the bird, which he also identified as a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron. He called other local birders with the news, but by then it was too dark to look for the heron.

The following morning at 5:30 a.m., a group of birders, including Jim, Mike and MerryLynn Denny, Larry McCloskey, Stacy Peterson, Laura Beck, and Shirley and Corey Muse, met Jim at the Sherer's home. After two hours of fruitless searching, the only bird seen was a Black-crowned Night-Heron, which flew from the same location where Jim had purportedly seen the yellow-crowned the previous evening. Jim's credibility vanished immediately, with many scowls cast his way.

At 1 p.m. the same day (31 May), Doug Morton was at the home of a friend, approximately 1.5 miles from the Sherer's house, to watch a basketball game. Doug saw a bird in the backyard along Stone Creek. He assumed it was a Great Blue Heron.

Doug was told the bird had been in his friend's backyard since 6 a.m. After the game, about 4 p.m., Doug took a second look at the bird, and after consulting a bird guide, decided it was a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron.

Doug called Shirley Muse, who in turn notified local birders. Everyone swamped this very hospitable non-birder's living room and were rewarded with wonderful looks at the heron. Jim Nestler received many apologies from those who had so recently doubted him! On hand to verify the sighting were the Dennys, Muses and Larry McCloskey. MerryLynn Denny photographed the bird in the pouring rain as it fed on crayfish in Stone Creek.

Washington's first record of a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron at Walla Walla.

The bird was next seen on the 7th of June at 5:30 a.m. in the yard next to Doug's friend's place. People observing the bird were Thais Dorland and Howard Armstrong, Jan and Keith Wiggers, Harold and Shirley Christenson, the Dennys and Ken Knittle. At 6:15 p.m. it was found one block west on Stone Creek, and many were able to observe it. Bob Morris and Allan Richards saw it on June 8th, again on Stone Creek. Since then many have sought the bird, but none has seen it. Please notify Mike Denny or Jim Nestler of any other sightings.

This is the first known record for Yellow-crowned Night-Heron in the Pacific Northwest (let alone Washington!). Two records exist from the San Francisco Bay area (Finnegan, personal communication). This was truly an amazing bird when one considers that there are no sighting records for this heron from the Mountain West and Great Basin areas.

Walla Walla College Marine Station
174 Rosario Beach
Anacortes, Washington 98221
Stalking the wild bird

By Jerry Tangren

Birders stand to learn a lot from hunters. Whether the final shot is with a gun, camera, or binoculars, the means to get that shot is essentially the same. However, most birders today have never learned close approach skills.

The following points were presented in a discussion on BIRDCHAT, the Internet computer chat line of the National Birding Hotline Cooperative, and contain the collective wisdom of Byron Butler, Nathan Dias, Dick Payne, Annika Forsten, Larry Gorbett, Joe Morlan, Gary Schiltz, Pat Whittle, Jane Becker-Haven, Nina Mollett, and Gail Mackiernan.

1. Remain silent, stand or sit as still as possible, and wear subtle-colored clothes.

2. Don't ever rush toward a bird, never run, always go slowly. Don't ever go toward a bird on a straight line between you and the bird. Instead, go in the direction of the bird at an angle of at least 30 degrees to either side of the bird. You may even be able to run or walk quickly as long as you move in this fashion. Occasionally deviate from this course to make it appear that you are walking away from the bird — this will put the bird at ease. However, you do not have to continuously advance. Sit down periodically if necessary to keep the bird calm.

3. Let the bird keep a rough idea of your position. A bird likes to know where potential threats are, and if it loses track of you, it will often get edgy and move higher up a tree, across a ditch, etc. This tip applies more to migrants and vagrants, i.e., birds that have no particular reason to stay in a given area.

4. Look casual. Stop to admire an orchid, browse on blackberries, inspect an orb weaver, or some other harmless activity. Birds are used to people just going about people business, so you do the same. Don't try to imitate a cat on a stalk.

5. Do not look directly at the bird. Birds read eyes, when they are looking at you they are looking at your eyes first. Put the bird in your peripheral vision. Wear a hat with a bill on it and peek out from under the bill in a "Princess Di" fashion. Even if moving on a parallel tack to a bird, staring at the bird is a no-no; it may think you're trying to move into position to pounce.

In order to keep track of the bird's location focus on some unique object near the bird, e.g., a big rock directly under where the bird is perched is perfect. Keep that object in your peripheral vision — the bird will not think you are after it. You may have to check from time to time to make sure that the bird is still where you found it. To do this do not look directly at the bird. Instead, look in the general direction either to the left or right of the bird, then pan across the bird's location without stopping.

Get a fix on the bird's location — since you've moved, your landmark may appear different or may no longer be visible, so while you pan get another landmark to focus on. Most birds will let you look at them briefly; however, they will not permit you to focus a stare at them.

6. In order to be successful at getting close, you need to study the species to know how close it will allow approaches. Do not try to get any closer than the species will normally allow. Pushing the species' "space" limit will flush the bird.

Even within a species there is much individual variation in behavior. Thus, try to read the individual before moving. Does it look nervous? Is it looking at you already? Are crest feathers erected (or, as in Hooded Mergansers, are they flattened)? Is the bird giving alarm calls or scolding calls? Is it engaged in some activity that makes it likely it will stay for a while (incubating, preening, sunning, sleeping, etc.)?

7. Once a bird is "on to you," it will probably not allow a closer approach. If it appears likely to remain in the area, this may be a good time to have lunch. Sit down, put your back to the bird and be fairly quiet and still for at least 20 minutes — look at some flowers, talk quietly to your birding partner, write field notes, or eat a snack. Do not make loud noises or wave your arms around, and do not look at the bird. Let it get used to you being in the area, prove that you are not a threat. Sure, you will lose track of it, but if you are any good, you will pick it up again — and this time it should be far less nervous.

8. It is always preferable to get the bird to come to you first. Sometimes this is possible by doing nothing at all with a naturally curious species or with very recalcitrant species. In these cases just sit down and be still, the bird will work its way through the vegetation to you, you don't even need to pish. This method works especially well for Mourning and MacGillivray's Warblers. If you are patient and can keep from looking around, the bird will move into position in front of you so it can see your face, but before it works up to doing this you may have to suffer 15-20 minutes of hearing it flit around behind you within a few feet or even a few inches. Here you have to learn to not get too excited, keep your head still, looking forward and a little down (so the bird can see your face from too high a perch). You have to have faith that the bird will really come around to the front of you — when it does, try not to blink and control your breathing.

If you are really excited at seeing a rare bird inches from you, you may be so excited that your heart rate and breathing may be very fast, and heavy breathing will scare the bird, so you need to consciously control this.

9. An alternative to stalking is the stand. Sit quietly and let whatever birds come to you. Perhaps pick out a water trickle along a dry creek bed. By sitting quietly you may get close views of several species you would otherwise miss.

Nothing will work all the time. If you try some of these things and they don't work, you may begin to lose faith in them. Keep practicing with them until you learn how to make them work for you.

Continued on page 3
The morning of May 5, 1993 dawned clear and calm at Point No Point, Kitsap County, as I awoke to complete a birdathon for the Tahoma Audubon Society. Finishing at 8:30 a.m., I sat down to tally my results, little imagining that the most exciting event in my birding life was soon to happen. At 10:30 my nine-year-old daughter Brita asked me to go to the beach as the tide was almost low and all sorts of strange marine creatures were waiting to be discovered.

We left the house with Brita walking about 10 feet ahead of me. Suddenly, a black and white bird flew up in front of her. I knew instantly that I had never seen such a bird anywhere before, let alone at Point No Point.

Telling Brita to watch the bird, which had flown around the front of my bulkhead, I ran to get my camera. Returning to the beach, I found Brita quietly watching a Black-backed Wagtail 30 feet away as it fed on flies and sand fleas under my pier. Quickly I shot the few photos left on the film roll.

Having seen three other species of wagtail in Alaska, I couldn't believe my good luck at seeing the fourth North American species in my own front yard!

Leaving Brita to watch the bird, I began phoning birding friends. Soon Brita informed me that the bird had flown. Leaving a garbled message on Thais Bock's answering machine, I left to try to relocate the bird. It was now 11:20 and I wondered if my photos contained recognizable images of a wagtail — as my photos in the past sometimes required a little imagination for identification.

Searching the beach I again located the wagtail on a big rock about half a mile from the house. After 30 minutes the bird began flying south until it was out of sight. Gone again, probably for good, I thought. Walking slowly along the beach, I heard an unusual churrup, churrup call. Turning to look, my spirits soared as the wagtail once again landed on the big rock.

After a nervous 15 minutes, I was finally in position when at 12:45 p.m. Bob and Georgia Ramsey arrived, followed shortly by George Gerdts with his camera.

I could relax now!

Addendum: The bird stayed around for two days, being last seen at 10:30 a.m. on May 7th.

WOS fall meetings in Seattle area

Seattle-area WOS meetings resume Monday, Sept. 13th (holidays and conflicts preclude meeting the first Mon. or subsequent Tue.) at 7:30 p.m. in the Burke Room, (not the downstairs classroom) at the UW's Burke Museum. Chris Wood, Collections Manager at the Burke, will speak on hybridization between Hermit and Townsend's Warblers in Washington, detailing the extent of hybridization, results of DNA studies, and locations of hybrid zones. There will also be a specimen display.

On October 4th (back to the first Monday, and back in the downstairs classroom), Joe Buchanan will speak on the Spotted Owl in Washington — current research and management. Joe is an Endangered Species Biologist with the state Department of Wildlife.

On Monday, November 1st, bring your slides for show and tell.

Newsletter Contributions

Please send news items, site guides, articles, opinion pieces and/or especially photographs for the next WOSNEWS by September 15th to Fred Bird, 1249 NE 92nd Street, Seattle, WA 98115 -- (206) 526-5671.
Tongue Point on the northern edge of the Olympic Peninsula and the surrounding localities of Freshwater Bay, Striped Peak, Salt Water Estuary, and Crescent Bay are interesting and varied areas in which to bird. Turkey Vultures congregate here in large numbers in the fall, many having just made the over-water journey from Vancouver Island. Alcids and sea ducks are also found along the rocky shores of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and marsh and land birds abound in the estuaries and forested areas.

Salt Creek (Clallam) County Park and Recreational Area covers much of Tongue Point. The extensive kelp beds make this area one of the top skin-diving spots in Washington. Otters and seals can be seen around the undulating mats of seaweed and driftwood, and gray whales have been seen farther offshore.

At low tides, you can walk out on the rocks of Tongue Point, view the tide pools, and see the birds in a better perspective. Ruddy Turnstones and Rock Sandpipers are occasionally seen on these rocks. Black Oystercatchers nest there. Harlequin Ducks, Surf Scoters, Double-crested Cormorants, Common Murres, Tufted Puffins, Rhinoceros Auklets, and other alcids can regularly be seen in the water offshore.

There are 90 campsites at Salt Creek Park, hosting the usual chorus of Golden-crowned Kinglets, Red-breasted Nuthatches, Winter Wrens, and Chestnut-backed and Black-capped Chickadees. Blue Grouse, Band-tailed Pigeons, Belted Kingfishers, the daggetti race of the Red-breasted Sapsucker, Northern Flickers, Swainson's Thrushes, Solitary Vireos, and several warblers have also been seen.

The Salt Creek estuary is a good spot to see Great Blue Herons, Bald Eagles, and Ospreys. There is a small parking lot belonging to the park just before Crescent Beach. Half of Salt Creek, which empties into Crescent Bay, is owned by the county, while the other half is privately owned and not open to the public except for a fee. The county road goes just behind the Crescent Bay beach from the roadside or from your car. I was told by a park ranger that there is a $3 charge to walk the beach, but I saw no one to collect such a fee.

Striped Peak, just east of Salt Creek Park, has turned out to be a fine hawkwatching site. With a grant to research the Turkey Vulture migration off Vancouver Island, and with advice from Fred Sharpe and Port Angeles-area birders, I chose this as a likely observation point. It is almost directly across from the Rocky Point military base on Vancouver Island, where most of the hundreds of B.C. vultures are counted by Victoria birders.

Striped Peak sits between Freshwater Bay and Tongue Point, and at its highest point is 1,166 feet above sea level. The hawkwatch is a couple of hundred feet lower at the end of the access road. The area is beautiful, with some old growth forest below and the straits spread out in front. Unfortunately, walking a few hundred feet to the rear (south) provides an extensive view of thousands of acres of clearcut — but we come for the fall migration and only look north!

The rough total for Turkey Vultures from this site in the fall of 1992 was 1,158. Also seen were 176 redtails, one Northern Goshawk, five Cooper's Hawks, 78 Sharp-shinned Hawks, 26 Bald Eagles, one Osprey, one peregrine and two Merlins. Turkey Vultures were seen in fairly large numbers every day from September 27th (when we counted 656) to October 4th (when 133 were recorded).

We will be there again this fall (the last week of September is best) and would welcome anyone who would like to help with the vulture watch.

To reach the hawkwatch site on Striped Peak, follow US 101 west from Port Angeles; turn right on State Route 112 — about 11 miles altogether — then right again on Freshwater Bay Road. Follow the road for 2.1 miles, then take the left-hand, uphill road (just before the boat landing at a small pond on the left) for 2.1 miles. Pull through the parking area to the north-facing slope.

Salt Creek Park and Tongue Point are 2.7 miles farther west of SR 112. Turn right at Camp Hayden Road and follow the road 4.2 miles to the campground. To reach Crescent Bay and Salt Creek estuary, continue on the Camp Hayden Road past the campground for about 0.3 miles.

22622 53rd Avenue SE
Bothell, Washington 98021
About 120 birders, the largest contingent ever to attend a WOS annual meeting, trooped into Walla Walla on the first weekend in June with great expectations. Barely a week earlier, local birder Jim Nestler discovered the state’s first Yellow-crowned Night-Heron along one of the many creeks that bisect the city. Then just a day before the meeting started, Keith and Jan Wiggers from Burlington pulled into a campground on the west side of the city and promptly discovered a Lark Bunting nearby.

Much to everyone’s regret, particularly Walla Walla birders who are justifiably proud of their county’s bird life, neither bird could be relocated for the visiting WOS crowd.

Nonetheless, the two-day event was a great success, highlighted by over 130 species seen in a countryside unusually green and lush after rainfall more than twice the seasonal average. Some of the species highlights included Ferruginous Hawks, turkeys, numerous owl roosts (mostly Great Horned), a large variety of warblers (including redstarts and chats), Grasshopper Sparrows, Black-chinned, Rufous and Calliope Hummingbirds, various vireos and a number of strange-sounding flycatchers. Clearly heading the list had to be the Green-tailed Towhees of Biscuit Ridge. Who can forget the battalion of birders lurching down a steep hillside in the morning fog and Larry McCloskey’s brilliant smile as the towhees finally appeared to the (quietly) cheering crowd.

Our lasting impression, however, is one of hospitality and great company. Local birders set a high standard organizing comfortable and inexpensive accommodations at Whitman College and van tours crisscrossing the southeast corner of our state. Special thanks to Priscilla Dauble, Mike and MerryLynn Denny, Larry Goodhew, Ken Knittle, Shirley Muse, Bob Woodley, and Larry, of course. Westsiders Harold Christenson and Bill Tweit also did duty as drivers.

— Photos by Schooley & Bird

Larry McCloskey and Larry Goodhew wear their smiles as the Biscuit Ridge Green-tailed Towhees finally appear.

The excitement was contagious as the battalion of WOSers, including Judy Roan, Alix Foster, Sharon Givan, Sara Clark, and Judy DuVall, among others, checked out the ultimately cooperative towhees.

In Eastern Washington birders and birds often compete for the rare vantage points atop fence posts and guard rails, including (left) Bill Tweit of Olympia and Mike Denny of Walla Walla.

Harold Ritland's reward for seeing his towhee was a long hike up the mountain.
As many of you are aware, I am working on a book about bird life at Green Lake in Seattle. Out of necessity, the book will confine its coverage to the lake and its immediate surroundings; excluding, for instance, lower Woodland Park.

Progress is slow, for I find too much delight in gathering data! And in order to make the book as complete as possible, I would like to enlist the help of WOS members. Below is printed a list of 156 species (not counting hybrids and domesticated species and varieties) that have been seen near Green Lake by Gene Hunn, Patrick Sullivan (Cattle Egret), and myself. I am interested in any observations others might have of species not on this list.

I would prefer written reports that include: date of observation; sex (if possible); approximately location on or around the lake; and anything special noted. Any observations will be included in the book and the observer(s) acknowledged.

I have marked those species for which observations are scarce (once or twice) with an asterisk. I would appreciate additional dates you may have for these species on the lake. Please send your notes to:

Martin Muller
6205 Latona Ave. NE
Seattle, Washington 98115-6652

Seattle's Green Lake bird sightings sought

The exchange on searching for Boreal owls in WOSNEWS #25 (June 1993) was both interesting and somewhat disturbing. Barbara Erling's criticism and Alan Richard's response provided two perspectives that I hope represent the spectrum of WOS members. An interchange concerning such an issue as birding ethics helps make an organization like WOS stronger by addressing a variety of issues beyond identification and listing.

Several elements in the two pieces were disturbing. The obvious anger expressed by Ms. Erling concerning the disturbance of birds like the Boreal Owl by "brutally competitive birders" and Mr. Richard's defense that it is simply a "scientifically established procedure" and that he feels only "slightly silly" about the disturbance reveals a wide gap in what is considered acceptable field behavior. It also points out that there is no clearly expressed approach to birding ethics within WOS. If this organization's mission is, as the masthead states: "to increase the knowledge of the birds of Washington and to enhance communication among all persons interested in those birds," then there is an apparent lack of communication concerning birding ethics in WOS.

I am well aware of the scientific necessity and value in the occasional disturbance of birds' lives (I have participated in such endeavors), and the real need to sometimes collect specimens for research to increase knowledge. However, there should be an equal effort to promote birding (i.e., recreational bird study) with a strong sense of respect for the creatures we pursue and habitats they inhabit.

I have no doubt that the vast majority of WOS birders do bird in an ethical manner, and that WOS is not full of "yuppie birders."

Still, the question remains: what is WOS' stance on birding ethics? There has been little published on the subject, and only mild references made to it during meetings. Are we to assume that it is a given, and that every WOS member practices good birding ethics (which unfortunately is not the case)?

Perhaps WOS should look to an organization like the American Birding Association, which tackles the subject on a regular basis, as a resource for a working code of ethics.

WOS consists of many of the best birders in Washington. We are looked upon as leaders by many new (and perhaps not as fanatic) members in the birding community. As such, we need to advocate better birding behavior and communicate its importance.

WOS should take birding ethics stand

By David Buckley

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Gaps in knowledge of breeding biology of Washington birds

Dennis Paulson

Readers are invited to fill in missing knowledge of the breeding biology of the birds listed below. I compiled this list from species accounts in The Birder's Handbook, by P. R. Ehrlich, D. S. Dobkin, and D. Wheye, Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1988. Information on these species is either entirely missing (0) or included but some question remains (?). In some, but certainly not all cases, these are birds whose nests are difficult to find or reach, or the young are difficult to follow through fledging. Any observations that fill in these gaps ought to be publishable. Please let me know.

1724 NE 98 St., Seattle, Washington 98115

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Call 'Reservoir Control' for Walla Walla delta levels

By Andy Stepniewski

I've often been frustrated by high water at the Walla Walla River delta. A difference of inches in water levels has dramatic effects on the numbers and diversity of shorebirds in the area.

On May 3rd, before undertaking the three-and-a-half hour roundtrip from my home in Wapato, I decided it would be good to know if the trip would be worth it. I started by calling Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) offices to see if they might be able to tell me about water levels. In Portland, the BPA “Environment Section” (503-230-4334) gave me the reservoir height at 338.1 feet — and it could be expected to rise overnight.

BPA, in turn, referred me to the “Reservoir Control” people with the Army Corps of Engineers (503-326-3741). Jeff Hauser and Bruce Glabau were the contacts. Jeff was very helpful. Apparently, the pool level behind McNary Dam — which governs the water level at the delta — varies from 338 feet to 340.5 feet, depending on power, irrigation, or fish requirements, among others. The level tends to drop overnight — but not always — as water is let through the generators for the evening peak hour power consumption.

If true, this meant that shorebirds on migration might spot the mud flats at dawn, stopping to refuel. I zoomed down to the delta to see what 338.1 feet meant, and arrived to find a vast expanse of mud, but virtually no shorebirds. Still, the potential for good shorebirding was there. I think any water level over 339 feet would result in little or no exposed mud on the delta.

Fortunately, in the fall, Kahlotus Lake is an exciting alternative for the shorebird aficionado. A three-stop shorebirding expedition beginning at the delta, then on to Kahlotus and finally to Othello is likely to yield an impressive interior shorebird state list.

291 Windy Point Drive
Wapato, Washington 98951
Three godwits — a shorebird lover's dream
By Tom Schooley

The two intrepid birders, Bob Morse and Dave Kaynor, joined me last September on a Black Hills Audubon field trip to Ocean Shores. We all agreed it was simply cosmic. The day started out slow, but at Grass Creek we did have a nice mixed flock which included an Orange-crowned Warbler, a Black-throated Gray Warbler, a Common Yellowthroat, and a Hutton's Vireo “singing.”

There was little action on the ocean beach, so we headed to the jetty at Point Brown. Two Elegant Terns gave us a brief look and flew on. A breeding-plumaged Pacific Loon flew out of the harbor, and many Common Loons were moving south. Just beyond the Westport jetty was a large flock of Sooty Shearwaters. There were no “rockpipers” on the jetty so we moved on to the game range.

We worked our way out the spit, stopping to study a flock of 25 Lesser Golden Plovers. A storm was brewing and we hustled out to the end of the spit, where a couple of Lapland Longspurs and many Heermann’s Gulls were present. The storm passed to the south, allowing us to eat our lunch, enjoy the sun, and observe many flocks of peeps moving into Oyhut Sink. On our way back we finally found one of the day’s target birds, a Buff-breasted Sandpiper. A stop at the (Catala Spit-Damon Point) marina produced an odd sight — a Green-backed Heron fishing from the dock.

Just north of the marina is a sandy hook which is good for “tall” shorebirds, and there the fun began. The spit held a flock of about 120 Long-billed Curlews, 10 Whimbrels, and 30 Marbled Godwits, all of them sleeping. Bob noticed a smaller, gray bird which deserved closer scrutiny. It finally stuck its nose out, confirming it was a godwit — a juvenile Bar-tailed Godwit! As we studied this bird, another flock of 50 Marbled Godwits circled over and landed a short way down the beach. I noticed an unusual bird in this flock too.

We convinced ourselves the bar-tail was real, and moved on to the second flock. Along the water’s edge another small gray godwit was feeding. It definately had a black tail, a white rump, and a strong white supercilium. Now we had a Hudsonian Godwit! Finally it flew, showing us its diagnostic black wing linings and paler flight feathers. Three godwit species in one spot — a shorebird lover’s dream come true.

We tallied 79 species for the day, including 20 shorebirds. Ocean Shores, in spite of its growing popularity, is still one of the premier Washington birding hotspots.

1326 Marion Street NE
Olympia, Washington 98506

Audubon watercolors coming to Seattle in 1995

Readers with good memories should note that 90 original John James Audubon watercolors (from which his famous prints were made) will be on display at the Seattle Art Museum from Oct. 12, 1995, through Jan. 7, 1996.