

Oregon's Malheur NWR & Woodpecker Wonderland with Naturalist Journeys



May 20 – 29, 2024

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When Steve Shunk, guide and author of the *Peterson Reference Guide to Woodpeckers of North America*, joined Naturalist Journeys, he brought expertise and familiarity with Oregon and the Pacific Northwest. Steve hails from the Bend/Sisters area and his signature tour combines the best of Central Oregon with the spectacular Malheur region in Eastern Oregon. Here we combine the delights of Oregon's Woodpecker Wonderland with Malheur's high-desert oasis for a fabulous experience in the Wild West.

This tour combines some of central and eastern Oregon's top birding hotspots. Experience some of the best bird diversity in North America, with over 200 breeding species. Expansive western scenery abounds.

The tour starts and ends in Redmond, Oregon, from which we drive a short way to explore the northern side of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge and surroundings, with its vast wetlands and lakes. For millennia, migratory birds have fed and bred among the emergent wetlands and surrounding uplands of the Harney basin, and this ritual continues today. Many thousands of water birds, raptors, and songbirds return each year, along with thousands of birders, who visit to experience the natural spectacle occurring in this magnificent region. The birding highlights at Malheur are many, and we spend three full days exploring wetland, desert, grassland, canyon, and riparian habitats.

Traveling through the refuge's top birding areas, we then spend two nights at the southern end of the Malheur Basin at Frenchglen, with great views of the rugged Steens Mountains. After time in rural enclaves, we then stay two nights in Bend and three nights in Sisters, two great small cities with western vibes—mountain vistas, pine forests, and the rivers running through town.

Each day of the tour we explore a broad diversity of habitats, from riparian woodland to wetlands and lakes to lush and in places, burned coniferous forests.

The first half of the tour is a waterfowl and wetland extravaganza. For the second half, our daily itinerary takes us in search of 11 nesting woodpecker species—incredible! Wander through recently burned forests in search of Three-toed and Black-backed Woodpeckers; enjoy mature cottonwood and aspen galleries in search of three different sapsuckers; and visit older burns and mature mixed-conifer forest for Lewis's and Pileated Woodpeckers, respectively. Each day, we encounter ponderosa pine forest, where we should find Williamson's Sapsucker and White-headed Woodpecker.

Tour Highlights

- Travel with experts—our guide is author of the *Peterson Reference Guide to Woodpeckers of North America*. He calls our route Woodpecker Wonderland and you can expect to find 11 nesting woodpecker species!
- Catch migration and arrival for resident species as spring arrives to this wetland and mountain landscape
- Hear the rancorous calls of Yellow-headed Blackbird; watch for marshes teeming with waterfowl
- Find five species of grebes and 10 species of western raptors
- Experience the rural west, its cowboy culture and wide-open spaces are home to rich wildlife
- Listen to quaking aspen trees trembling in the breeze while looking at the day-glow colors of Lazuli Bunting and Western Tanager
- Watch Vaux's Swift acrobatic in the sky against backdrop views of the snow-clad Cascades
- See Osprey harass Bald Eagle carrying fish over scenic mountain lakes with Bufflehead and Barrow's Goldeneye down below

- Learn how fire ecology has made a mosaic of habitat prime for birds across varied habitats
- In Bend, end great days of birding with top-rated local foods and a fabulous selection of brews and wine from the region

Tour Summary

10-Day / 9-Night Oregon Birding and Nature Tour
 \$TBD, from Redmond, OR
 Airport is Redmond Municipal Airport (RDM)

Day-to-Day Itinerary

Mon., May 20

Arrive in Redmond, Oregon | Drive to Hines, Gateway to Malheur Country

Please plan to arrive at the Redmond Municipal Airport (RDM), servicing Deschutes County, by 2:00 PM. We have a 2.5-hour drive to Hines. After a brief birding stop along the way, settle into your accommodations and meet up for an early dinner and possibly some evening birding in the Silvies River flood plain. This is our first introduction to the diverse habitats of the Harney Basin.

Accommodations at the Best Western Rory and Ryan Inn, Hines (D)

Tues., May 21 Silvies River Floodplain | Malheur Lake

On our first full day, we have much to explore. We spend the morning crisscrossing the wetlands of the Silvies River floodplain. Sometimes referred to as the Malheur-Harney Lakes Basin, this closed sub-basin is named for Harney Lake, an alkali sink in this northwest corner of the immense Great Basin. The Silvies River drains from the southern limits of the Oregon's Blue Mountains and across its expansive flood plain, with its delta feeding into the north shore of Malheur Lake.

Each spring, regional water managers direct the flow of the Silvies through a complex network of canals and ditches to flood irrigate the private agricultural lands between the Blue Mountain foothills and Malheur Lake. Flood irrigation in the Silvies flood plain more-or-less emulates the "natural" flooding that once occurred before immigrants settled the region.

South of the Silvies flood plain, three lakes—Malheur, Mud, and Harney—form the top of a lopsided T that defines the northern limits of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. After lunch at The Narrows, we skirt the southern shore of Malheur Lake, the largest of the three, en route to Malheur Refuge Headquarters. With its giant cottonwood trees and a productive spring-fed pond, Refuge HQ lets us experience a very busy songbird migration. This desert oasis attracts an amazing array of migrants, including flycatchers, vireos, tanagers, and warblers. We could encounter flocks of Western Tanager joined by any of 10 likely warblers—out of 20 possible warbler species! Black-headed Grosbeak and Lazuli Bunting frequent the feeders at the visitor center, with hummingbird feeders hosting up to four different hummer species.

Accommodations at the Best Western Rory and Ryan Inn, Hines (D)

Wed., May 22 & Thurs., May 23 Malheur Refuge | Blitzen River Valley

After two nights in town, we head south into the Blitzen River Valley. The Blitzen River forms the stem of the Malheur Refuge T, flooding a lush network of wetlands that stretches 35 miles from the delta at the southern shore of Malheur Lake to the mouth of the Blitzen Canyon. The primary source of the Blitzen River is the snowmelt from Steens Mountain, a 35-mile-long fault block that rises from the valley floor—at 4,000 feet

elevation—to its summit at nearly 10,000 feet. The Blitzen delivers the vast majority of the water that feeds the 140,000-acre Malheur Refuge.

Over two full days, we visit such Malheur hotspots as Buena Vista Ponds, Benson Pond, and the deep-water Krumbo Reservoir, as well as Page Springs and the wild and scenic Blitzen River. From our base in the quaint and historic hamlet of Frenchglen, we explore the Blitzen Valley and surrounding uplands, searching for over 150 breeding species, including: five different grebes; over 15 nesting waterfowl species; 10 species each of raptors, shorebirds, and sparrows; and up to eight different flycatcher and six swallow species. Yellow-headed Blackbird are abundant in the marshes, with Willets and Wilson's Snipe scattered among them. Thousands of Franklin's Gulls and White-faced Ibis breed on the refuge, along with over 100 pairs of Sandhill Crane. Additional breeding bird highlights include rare Oregon nesters such as Trumpeter Swan, Eastern Kingbird, Bobolink, and Yellow-breasted Chat.

Malheur offers many other highlights, including iconic herds of wild horses; nearly 60 species of wild mammals on the refuge alone; carpets of desert wildflowers; a dynamic cultural history, from the first Paiute residents to the later cattle barons, as well as stories from the recent occupation of Malheur Refuge.

Accommodations at the Drover's Inn & Frenchglen Hotel, Frenchglen (B,L,D, both days)

Fri., May 24 Malheur to Bend

The Malheur region provides us with an amazing experience, but our adventure has just begun! After a final morning of birding around Frenchglen, we head west to downtown Bend—ready to explore the Cascade Mountains. We arrive in Bend in time for lunch, followed by afternoon birding at Shevlin Park. This amazing city park along Tumalo Creek supports old-growth conifers and productive aspen galleries. The aspens alone can host up to six nesting woodpecker species, including multiple pairs of Lewis's Woodpecker.

In Bend, we spend two nights at McMenamin's hotel at the historic Old St. Francis School. Construction on the original school began in early 1925, and the first class graduated later that year. Minor expansions occurred in the 1950s, but a major project in 1968 included the construction of a cafeteria, stage, gym, and meeting rooms. In 2000, the school relocated, and the property was purchased by McMenamin's. The McMenamin brothers, Mike and Brian, started their business in 1983, and the company has become a northwest institution, with historic venues converted to tourism properties throughout Oregon and Washington. You will thoroughly enjoy your stay here, and you should be prepared to spend some time in the on-site Turkish bath!

Accommodations at the Best Western Ponderosa Lodge, Sisters (B,L,D)

Sat., May 25 Birding Bend & The Cascades Lakes

Our first full day in Central Oregon begins along the upper reaches of Tumalo Creek, with mixed-conifer forest and breeding birds such as Williamson's Sapsucker, Canada Jay, MacGillivray's Warbler, and Evening Grosbeak. The balance of the day is spent in the high Cascades lakes region. We focus on two special lakes—Sparks and Hosmer—in search of specialty breeding birds of the mountains.

Sparks Lake typically hosts Barrow's Goldeneye and Hooded Merganser, with Pine Siskin and Red Crossbill in the uplands and Mountain Bluebird and Sandhill Crane in the surrounding meadows. Hosmer gives us our first chance for American Three-toed Woodpecker, plus shallow waters with Ring-necked Duck, Pied-billed Grebe, and Bufflehead. The drive around these lakes has its own allure, with spectacular views of the Three Sisters mountains, plus Broken Top and Bachelor Butte, a volcanic landscape that is second to none.

Accommodations at the Best Western Ponderosa Lodge, Sisters (B,L,D)

Sun., May 26 – Tues., May 28 Birding Woodpecker Wonderland!

We leave Bend early and head northwest to the Sisters area, our gateway and base for exploring Central Oregon's Woodpecker Wonderland, where 11 woodpecker species raise their young each year. Woodpecker searching gives us the framework for our days, but the diverse habitats in the region expose us to a correspondingly diverse array of breeding species and late migrants. The eastern slope of the Cascades is characterized by stratified montane habitats that range from juniper woodlands to alpine tundra. Several factors contribute to this diversity phenomenon:

- The annual rainfall gradient from the Cascades crest to the Ponderosa Pine forest ranges from 120 inches to 10 inches in as few as 10 miles; this is "rain equivalent," as most precipitation falls as snow. This horizontal gradient results in narrow bands of habitat, each of which is adapted to a different amount of precipitation.
- Several significant streams and two rivers flow from the eastern slope, supporting riparian habitats characterized by aspen, willow, alder, and other streamside vegetation.
- "Natural" fire regimes in the region vary by elevation and habitat type, with more frequent, less intense fires typical at lower elevation pine forests and high-intensity, infrequent fires at higher-elevation mixed-conifer forests.
- All fires burn in a mosaic of intensities, with patches of high-intensity, mixed intensity, and low intensity fire interspersed throughout a given fire perimeter.

These factors combine to support nearly 150 species of breeding birds. Lakes in the region host nesting Hooded and Common Mergansers, as well as Bufflehead and Barrow's Goldeneye. Osprey and Bald Eagle occur along the shorelines, with Spotted Sandpiper just arriving on breeding territories. This is an excellent time of year for hummingbirds, with resident Anna's being met by migrant—and locally nesting—Rufous and Calliope. We find excellent study opportunities for Empidonax flycatchers, with Hammond's, Gray, Dusky, Willow, and Pacific-slope all on territories by mid-May. We also stay alert for any of the eight local Corvid species, including Gray Jay, Pinyon Jay, and Clark's Nutcracker.

Each of the habitats we visit brings us a new array of songbirds. Cassin's Vireo, Cassin's Finch, and Pygmy Nuthatch are most common in ponderosa pine forest; mixed-conifer forest supports Hermit Thrush, Hermit Warbler, and Evening Grosbeak; and shrubby slopes are loaded with Fox Sparrow and Green-tailed Towhee, with plenty of Lazuli Bunting and Nashville Warbler, too. Across the region, we see Western Tanager and Black-headed Grosbeak. Red Crossbill are a regular distraction flying above the forest canopy, while Vaux's Swift occasionally twitter overhead. Wherever we go, throughout these days, we can count on great birding and the amazing scenery of the Oregon Cascades.

Meals are a combination of favorite local restaurants and some picnic lunches.

Accommodations at the Best Western Ponderosa Lodge, Sisters (B,L,D)

Wed., May 29 Morning Birding | Departures from Redmond

On our final day in central Oregon, we enjoy some casual birding before heading to Redmond Municipal Airport. We return you to the Redmond Municipal Airport in time for your scheduled departures after 1:00 PM. (B)

NOTE: Our local woodpecker festival is scheduled for the second weekend after our tour, and you may wish to stay in the area an extra week to attend the event and explore the region more. This festival offers a great chance to spend time in the field with some of our best local guides, as well as birders from all over the country. If you wish to attend the festival, note that the event is very popular. In order to get onto any field

trips, you should closely follow the East Cascades Audubon website—or subscribe to the local listserve, COBOL—and enroll immediately upon the start of registration. Contact us for further details.

Tour Details

Plan Ahead!

Protect yourself with Allianz Travel Insurance. Their website will show a grid of tour cost and your age category for you to make selections. As of January 2017, Naturalist Journeys pays 100% of your flight carbon offset.

Cost of the Journey

Cost of the Journey is \$TBD DBL / \$TBD SGL, based on double occupancy, per person. The tour price includes airport transfers, 9 nights' accommodations, all meals from dinner Day One through breakfast Day 10, professional guide services, park and preserve entrance fees, and miscellaneous program expenses.

Cost of the journey does not include airfare from your home to Redmond, Oregon or items of a personal nature, such as drinks from the bar, telephone, and local guide gratuities (at your discretion, we will give some guidelines).

Travel Information

Please plan to arrive at Redmond Municipal Airport (RDM) by 2:00 PM on May 20. Please plan departures after 1:00 PM on May 29.

Items of Note

We travel in a large passenger van with comfortable seating for up to seven birders and our guide, so everyone will have a window seat. This is an active birding tour, typically we travel by vehicle from site to site, and each day will involve considerable walking. We may hike up to three or four miles per day, with mostly short walks at a 'birdwatcher's pace' but a few routes may take us up short, steep trails or over rough terrain.

As with all Naturalist Journeys tours, Steve will offer great birding in the context of a broad natural history experience, we take plenty of time to 'smell the flowers'—and touch the lava rocks, wet our hands in fresh springs, enjoy the antics of chipmunks, etc. We review our birds and other wildlife sightings at dinner each evening, but we will also discuss the broader discoveries of the day. We hope to send you home understanding of Oregon and the Pacific Northwest's ecology and current conservation issues.

Photo Credits

Lewis's Woodpecker, Steve Wolfe (SW); Pileated Woodpecker by Bill Pennell on Unsplash; Yellow-headed Blackbird, Doug Greenberg; White-headed Woodpecker, SW; Lazuli Bunting, NJ Stock

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