

Oregon's Malheur and Woodpecker Wonderland Trip Report | May 22-31, 2021 | By Steve Shunk



With guides Dan Donaldson and Steve Shunk, and participants Brenda, Darlene, Jean, Jill, Larry, Mark, Mike, Syl, and Tom.



What an adventure we had. Two of Oregon's most premiere birding locations at the peak of spring migration and the onset of local breeding season. Woodpeckers galore and some of the highest peaks in the state. A bit of exciting weather. Amazing wildflowers. Exploring seemingly endless expanses of public land. This was a first-annual for Naturalist Journeys, but I was both proud and grateful to turn over my signature tours to Malheur Refuge and our local Woodpecker Wonderland.

Sat., May 22: Redmond to Hines

It all started with a rendezvous at the tiny Redmond airport, followed by a quick orientation and the group sailing away into the desert expanses of southeastern Oregon. We enjoyed Osprey on their nest on the outskirts of Bend before crossing the sagebrush ocean. Passing through the Millican and Hampton Valleys, we got our first tease of the great raptor show to come, with Ferruginous, Swainson's, and Red-tailed Hawks capping the utility poles. Oh yeah, and some Prairie Falcon and herds of pronghorn for good measure. We got into town—the collective name for towns of Burns and Hines—just in time for a steak dinner, after which we settled into our motel in Hines, primed for the days to come.

Sun., May 23: Silvies Flood Plain

A spring introduction to the Malheur region always starts with a good sampling of the Silvies River flood plain. After breakfast, we did a loop around the west side of the basin. Potter Swamp gave us our first introduction to

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Sandhill Cranes and the abundance of other water birds, including Cinnamon Teal, Black-necked Stilt, American Avocet, Willet, and Wilson's Phalarope, all of which breed among the flooded fields. Spinning back around Highway 205 and Hotchkiss Lane, we encountered over 100 White-faced Ibis, dozens of Yellow-headed Blackbirds, and a Wilson's Snipe calling from a fencepost. Fields of blue camas caught the light and glowed across the landscape. The Hines sewage ponds produced some of our only Lesser Scaup of the trip as well as several Ruddy Ducks. Before lunch, we ran the Foley Road loop, where the Silvies pours into the northern end of the flood plain. We had great comparison of Ring-billed and California Gulls, as well as some of our first Long-billed Curlews and more Willets. A few Hooded Mergansers showed in one of the river channels. The end of the road gave us great views at the mouth of the Silvies canyon, as well as a flock of at least 30 Cedar Waxwings and our first Yellow-breasted Chat.

After lunch, we headed to the eastern half of the flood plain. Hotchkiss Road hosted our only Trumpeter Swan of the trip in the lush green field, and we had a surprising Northern Mockingbird along the edge of the road. A classic stop at the Island Ranch 'power station pond' saw a covey of California Quail scurrying across the road, as well as Black Terns hawking and gleaning insects from the pond area. We rounded Island Ranch and Embree Bridge roads, crossing the east fork of the Silvies before heading to Lawen and Ruh-Red Roads at the northern edge of the Malheur Lake flood plain and the boundary of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge—heretofore called 'Refuge'. Loggerhead Shrike and Horned Lark popped up in the sagebrush flats before we headed south toward The Narrows. Though the Narrows itself was dry, one of two Ferruginous Hawk nests gave us excellent looks at the fluffy white nestlings. After lunch at The Narrows Café, we wandered the grounds of the RV park and found Gray Flycatcher and Lincoln's Sparrow hanging around a small area of bird feeders. After a birdy crossing of Sodhouse Lane, we reached Refuge headquarters (HQ) and Visitor Center, where we spent the rest of the afternoon.

HQ is always a highlight of birding on the Refuge, with its large stand of Black Cottonwoods and a mess of other deciduous trees and shrubs attracting great numbers of migrants and locally breeding songbirds. We were not disappointed. After watching Black-chinned Hummingbird at the feeders, we wandered to Marshall Pond. Here, Black and Forster's Terns put on a show, along with five swallow species, missing only Violet-green, of which we



would see plenty later in the trip. The pond also hosted a migrant flock of 25 Long-billed Dowitchers. Other highlights of Refuge HQ included Evening Grosbeaks at

eye level; over 70 Yellow-headed Blackbirds scattered among the feeding stations and trees around the grounds; Lark Sparrow and up to a dozen Lazuli Buntings near the gift shop; and Bullock's Orioles, Western Tanagers and our first of countless Yellow Warblers. After getting our fill of the fledgling Great Horned Owls, we headed back to town, and enjoyed a private dinner at Rhojo's Bistro before crashing back at the motel. And this was only our first full day of the trip!

Mon., May 24: Malheur Refuge | The Blitzen Valley

We headed south on Highway 205, after a quick stop at the Burns fishing ponds, where we watched our only Canvasbacks of the tour, along with a handful of American Wigeon. More time with the Ferruginous Hawk nests was appreciated by all before venturing out South Harney Road and into the sagebrush uplands. Here we sought Sagebrush Sparrow, which rewarded us with its singing foray from the top of its eponymous perches. A pair of local Golden Eagle nests appeared to be unused this season, but we had a nice consolation. As we headed back toward The Narrows, we found some folks stopped near a funky dry lot. Inquiring with them found us also stopped here to watch a couple of Burrowing Owls atop their nest mounds. Farther south along Highway 205, we took a scenic detour at the Buena Vista Ponds. A short hike up the hill gave us great views of the lower Blitzen River Valley and snow-covered Steens Mountain to the southeast. Dropping down onto the loop road around the ponds, we found our first of two American Bitterns, along with many loquacious Marsh Wrens and nice views of a Say's Phoebe. We made it to the tiny hamlet of Frenchglen in time for lunch. Here we would spend the next couple days dodging thunderstorms between birding forays and absorbing gorgeous views of the surrounding landscape.

In Frenchglen proper, we wandered the grounds of the hotel and were startled by a Prairie Falcon bolting through town, possible on a bead for one of the many starlings nesting in the big elm trees. We were also

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introduced to the local Western Wood-Pewee, another Say's Phoebe, and the cacophony of Pine Siskins in the tops of the trees. After lunch—and a brief rain shower—we headed toward P Ranch and the south leg of the Refuge Central Patrol Road (CPR).

The managed wetlands of the southern Blitzen Valley are the first to get flooded in the spring, bringing thousands of birds to begin their nesting process. Again, we were not disappointed. We skirted expansive wetlands and stopped at several open waters, including Cottonwood, Knox, Dredger, and Benson Ponds. The CPR cuts right through the flood plain and it was lined with water birds. Among the many Cinnamon Teal and Redheads we found many handsome pairs of Ruddy Ducks and Wilson's Phalaropes. We had to dodge Ring-necked Pheasants on the gravel road while being distracted by dozens of White-faced Ibis in the fields. Knox pond hosted many Eared Grebes in their finest breeding plumage. But all these birds were not even the biggest highlights of the afternoon! The south CPR hosts some of the westernmost nesting Bobolinks in North America, and we counted at least 14 males singing and skylarking over the wet meadows. Farther north, we got up-close-and-personal with an unwary Sora at Cottonwood Pond, and a Virginia Rail popped out of the cattails at Benson Pond almost as close as the earlier Sora. We had stunning looks at a Black-crowned Night-Heron perched atop a willow along the Blitzen River, while we sorted through dozens of Yellow Warblers on the channel. Rounding out the afternoon, we all enjoyed excellent looks at a displaying American Bittern, standing in the great wide open



on a levee, flashing its puffy white flank feathers to proclaim its territory and attract a mate. A family-style dinner capped off our second full day, with already many fond memories of the Malheur realm.

Tues., May 25: Blitzen and Diamond Valleys

Before breakfast, part of the group ventured out along the one-mile Barnes Spring Road. Birding was a little slow—by Malheur standards—but they managed to see several Black-billed Magpies, a Northern Flicker, and some of our only Bushtits of the trip. All of us enjoyed more of the buzzy Pine Siskins in town feeding on the ground on fallen seeds from the elm trees. Full from a hearty Frenchglen breakfast, we headed back to the Refuge toward Page Springs. We stopped at a very special Bald Eagle nest, with a nestling still present and an adult perched alongside; this is only the second year in 100 that Bald Eagles have nested on Malheur Refuge.

We arrived at Page Springs campground and drove to the south end for a hike along the ‘Wild-and-Scenic’ Blitzen River. Despite being a little muddy from the rains, the trail took us along a gorgeous, pristine stretch of the Blitzen, through willows and red-osier dogwood, with western juniper woodland on the slope above. Along the hike, we found an Ash-throated Flycatcher and several Lesser Goldfinches. A Yellow-breasted Chat stood up and ushered its comical song from the tops of the willows, and we had a nice warbler sampling, with Black-throated Gray, Townsend’s and Wilson’s Warblers along the river. The afternoon would take us to the center of the Blitzen Valley and across the Diamond Swamp to east side of the Refuge. But first, we ventured across the CPR and out to Krumbo Reservoir, also on the Refuge’s east side. Krumbo holds the deepest water on the refuge, and it often brings in more diving birds than the other ponds at Malheur. A few of the highlights at Krumbo included nice comparisons of Clark’s and Western Grebes and a handful of Caspian Terns. Violet-green Swallows foraged below us while we stood on the shallow rim, and a few distant Chukars called from across the reservoir.

Perhaps the biggest highlight at Krumbo was not the avifauna but the blooming flora on the desert floor. We encountered a gorgeous spread of wildflowers here among the big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*), just a few of which included: narrow-leaved phacelia (*P. linearis*); Gray’s desert parsley (*Lomatium grai*); desert paintbrush



(*Castilleja chromosa*); common larkspur (*Delphinium nuttallianum*); clustered broomrape (*Orobanche fasciculata*); linear-leaf daisy (*Erigeron linearis*); and thread-stalk locoweed (*Astragalus filipes*). Hundreds of flying White-faced Ibis ushered us out of the Krumbo Valley, and we made a quick stop at an impressive display of petroglyphs on a giant basalt boulder. The rest of the afternoon would take us to the Diamond Valley, but not before a brief tour of the Diamond Craters Outstanding Natural Area.

The Diamond Craters display some of the “most diverse volcanic features in the nation,” according to the Bureau of Land Management. Having erupted sometime in the last 25,000 years, the craters display a truly outstanding array of vents, lava tubes, cinder cones, splatter cones, and more. We made our way to one of the splatter cones and peered down into the bowl while the resident Canyon Wren serenaded us from just a few meters away. We also heard Rock Wren off in the distance before a brief jaunt down the road for a nice encounter with a singing Brewers Sparrow.

But the day wasn’t quite over. Leaving the craters, we entered the northern end of the Diamond Valley, a lush expanse of flood-irrigated agricultural fields fed from the snowmelt of the Kiger Gorge on Steens Mountain. This wet-meadow habitat supports a plethora of water birds. Before we could even get to the meadows, however, we spotted a large raptor soaring along the rimrock. All dark, long wings, and flying with a slight dihedral—it was a Golden Eagle! We stopped immediately to allow everyone a better look and found a second bird riding the thermals off the rim. After missing the eagles on South Harney Road, this was an especially satisfying encounter. Passing through the Diamond Valley, we enjoyed feeding flocks of White-faced Ibis in the emerald fields, with bright-white Great Egrets punctuating the edges. Back to Frenchglen for another delicious family-style meal and our final night at Malheur.

Wed., May26: Malheur | Bend

After stuffing ourselves again with a farm-style breakfast at the hotel, we decided to head back to Page Springs, since the storm cut our visit short the day before. The willows along the spring outflow and the river were teeming with birds, most of which were loudly singing Yellow Warblers. We finally got our first look at a



handsome Eastern Kingbird, a species—like the Bobolink—that nearly reaches the westernmost limits of its range here at Malheur. Many Cedar Waxwings were flycatching from the willows, and we got excellent looks at several Yellow-breasted Chats.

Departing the Blitzen Valley, we once again crossed the Refuge eastward and headed north past Diamond Craters. Our goal was the Peter French Round Barn, once a field station for the legendary—and infamous—cattle baron of the Blitzen Valley. While serving as the land manager for the French-Glen cattle company, French famously tricked and defrauded local homesteaders to acquire their land. He was finally murdered in broad daylight, and the assailant was exonerated of the crime. Anyway, the Round Barn stands as one of the region's extant memorials to the Pete French legacy. After stopping at the privately owned Round Barn Visitor Center, we wandered into the barn itself to find the previously reported Great Horned Owl roosting in the rafters. Outside the barn, we watched a Western Kingbird—our only one seen on the tour—along with a Say's Phoebe. Heading out the driveway, we heard and then worked hard to see our first Sage Thrasher, a bird that had been frustratingly 'heard-only' several times earlier across the region's sage flats.

After burgers and shakes at RJ's in Burns, we headed west toward Central Oregon. Blazing across the high lava plains, we made our first stop at a prehistoric dry river canyon. This steep basaltic gorge once drained Lake Millican—now Millican Valley—into what is now the Crooked River watershed. Always an obligatory stop on the Malheur route, we ventured to the precipice of the canyon for the stunning view, and we were treated to superb looks at a singing Rock Wren, with Black-throated Gray and Townsend's Warblers in the nearby junipers. We made it to Bend in time for a relaxing afternoon at McMenamin's St. Francis Hotel followed by dinner at the onsite brew pub. It was time for the Central Oregon Cascades and Woodpecker Wonderland.

Thur., May 27: Tumalo Creek

Sated with breakfast at McMenamin's, we first drove to Bend's Shevlin Park, a legacy of the Bend logging era: a swath of old-growth conifers and aspens donated to the city by the Shevlin-Hixon logging company. Shevlin is legendary among locals for its booming population of nesting Lewis's Woodpeckers, and this was a banner year for this unusual member of the woodpecker family. We watched active nests of the Lewis's in the main aspen grove and in just about every pine snag along Tumalo Creek. Their flight forays for aerial insects kept them crisscrossing above the canopy throughout our visit.

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But the Lewis's were only one of the woodpecker species we encountered at Shevlin. For a true introduction to Woodpecker Wonderland, we also watched nests of a Hairy Woodpecker, Northern Flicker and Downy Woodpecker. Despite all this activity, it was hard to pull everyone away from the sapsucker nest that peered down on the parking lot from just above eye level. Here, a Red-breasted Sapsucker was mated to a Red-breasted x Red-naped hybrid, a common pairing in our region where these two species meet. They repeatedly came and left from the nest between food deliveries as the nestlings squeaked constantly from inside the cavity.

The aspen grove at Shevlin also kept us busy with a few nesting songbirds, including Warbling Vireo, House Wren, and Black-headed Grosbeak. Walking upstream along the creek also produced Steller's Jay, Western Wood-Pewee, and Western Tanager, all birds that would be common in the coming days. Did I already mention the Lewis's Woodpeckers? It seemed like we found a new nest around every corner of the trail; at least 15 pairs of Lewis's nested in the park this summer.

After lunch in downtown Bend, we headed upstream on Tumalo Creek. Quickly leaving the dominant ponderosa pine zone, we entered mixed-conifer forest at the head of Skyliners' Road. A walk up the 804 road gave us excellent looks at Mountain Chickadee, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and Hairy Woodpecker, with Pine Siskin and Red Crossbill chattering constantly from the canopy. A twitch farther upstream, we stopped at the crossing to check for dippers. And there they were, an adult American Dipper feeding a recent fledgling. Up the canyon we went for stunning looks at the 100-foot Tumalo Falls. And before leaving the parking lot, we all enjoyed eye-level looks at a very territorial Golden-crowned Kinglet flashing his bright orange crown. A fitting end to a very productive first full day in the Cascades.

Fri., May 28: Sisters to Camp Sherman

After another delicious McMenamin's breakfast, we headed toward Sisters and the heart of Woodpecker Wonderland. As bathroom stops go, the Village Green Park in Sisters is one of the birdiest I know. This morning gave us great looks at Pygmy Nuthatch, California Scrub-Jay, and the often elusive Red Crossbill. Next stop: Calliope Crossing. Calliope Crossing, named for its breeding Calliope Hummingbirds, lies on Indian Ford Creek



and acts as one of the best birding hotspots in Central Oregon. First, we went to check a possible sapsucker nest site in a cluster of aspen trees that had been used in several successive years. No active nest this year, but just as we were discussing aspen ecology, we looked up to see a Northern Pygmy-Owl staring down at us! A few moments later, the bird was gone, but it returned almost immediately with a mouse in its talons. We watched it for some time as it ripped into the mouse's little face. We were eventually able to get outstanding light on this amazing critter, with a beautiful background of glowing aspen leaves.

Calliope Crossing always hosts several woodpecker nests, and this year was no exception. We drove upstream a short ways to another stand of aspens, where we had staked out nests of Williamson's Sapsucker, Northern Flicker, and a mixed pair of sapsuckers, i.e. a Red-breasted Sapsucker mated to another Red-breasted x Red-naped hybrid. Also nesting in the older aspen cavities were Tree Swallow, House Wren, Western Bluebird, and White-breasted Nuthatch.

Time for another bathroom stop, and as mentioned before, ours are no ordinary bathroom stops. This time, Indian Ford Campground gave us excellent looks at Green-tailed Towhee and Hammond's Flycatcher, all while MacGillivray's Warbler and Warbling Vireo sang from the riparian habitat. On to Whiskey Springs. Whiskey is located in a mixed conifer stand on Green Ridge, and this area burned the prior year, so we weren't sure what to



expect. The spring itself was quiet, but we found Olive-sided Flycatcher, Cassin's Finch, and Western Tanager in the surrounding trees. Deeper into the burn, we also found our first Black-backed Woodpeckers of the trip, with an active Hairy Woodpecker nest nearby.

Lunch at the Suttle Lake Boathouse is always a pleasant affair. After feeding, we scanned the lake and found what appeared to be a family group of Western Grebes, as well as a male Hooded Merganser. The main attraction for the afternoon was a ¾-mile hike to the head of Jack Creek. This lovely walk is flat and easy and offers some of the best birding and tree diversity in the region. At least 10 conifer species can be identified along the trail, including Englemann spruce; western white, lodgepole, and ponderosa pines; grand fir; Douglas-fir; and Pacific yew. The birding this day was equally rewarding. The open shrubby habitat produced Yellow, Nashville, and MacGillivray's Warblers, Dusky Flycatcher and Fox Sparrow, while the conifer stands brought us Hammond's Flycatcher, Cassin's Vireo, 'Audubon's' Yellow-rumped Warbler, Chipping Sparrow, and Brown Creeper.

Our final outing of the day took us into the forest village of Camp Sherman, where we enjoyed a delicious Peruvian/Mexican dinner after watching the American Dipper bring food to its nest under the bridge.

Sat., May 29: Sisters to Sunriver

We started this morning with an early breakfast and a hike along Trout Creek Swamp, near Sisters. Recent reports of American Three-toed Woodpecker got our hopes up. While searching in vain for the Three-toed, we found a pair of Red-naped Sapsuckers, a Red-breasted Sapsucker, and Hairy, White-headed, and Black-backed Woodpeckers; nice consolations for our miss at the Three-toed. Trout Creek is another spot for great habitat diversity, with a lush little creek and wet meadow adjacent to mixed-conifer forest and recent burned area. In addition to the woodpeckers, we picked up Clark's Nutcracker, Swainson's Thrush, Lincoln's Sparrow, a flock of 30+ Red Crossbills, and our best looks yet at Dusky and Olive-sided Flycatchers. After lunch back in Bend, we went for the next possible Three-toed spot on the Cascade Lakes Highway. Driving past Mt. Bachelor ski area, we were surprised at the amount of snow remaining on the sides of the road, though we were above 6,000 feet elevation. Our goal was Sparks Lake. The access road still had a few slushy snow drifts, but our vehicles had no trouble getting to the boat ramp. As a shallow and marshy, high-elevation lake, Sparks can always host unexpected birds, and today was a good one.



The far shore had Canvasback and Redhead among the many Canada Geese. As an even bigger bonus, a flock of over 50 Franklin's Gulls wheeled and screamed along the edge of the lake, a rewarding sighting considering we had poor looks at this species at Malheur. Finally, a look at the smaller back bay brought us a great show of feisty Barrow's Goldeneyes. We enjoyed watching multiple males chasing females in flight and performing their courtship displays. Alas no Three-toed Woodpeckers. Our final birding of the day would take us to the Sunriver Nature Center while we waited for a dinner table at the Sunriver Brewery. The pond at the nature center hosts resident Trumpeter Swans, and one of the birds was found sleeping on the island. Unexpectedly and fairly rare for the region was a Great Egret hunting at the edge of the pond. The pond is small, so a couple other birds gave us close-up views, including Pied-billed Grebe and a handsome Ring-necked Duck, with perfect light so that we could actually see the cinnamon-colored ring around its neck. Dinner at the brewery—one of over 40 in the region—was a fitting end to the day.

Sun., May 30: Sisters

Our last full day would take us back to Sisters in search of a few missed species, and one more try for the Three-toed Woodpecker. Our obligatory bathroom stop at Village Green was capped with stunning, eye-level views of a male White-headed Woodpecker, as well as a very vocal White-breasted Nuthatch. We next sought the 'downtown flock' of local Pinyon Jays. Only a few blocks from Village Green, we found the jays calling and cavorting around the church community known as 'heavenly acres'. As is often the case, the flock contained dozens of birds, and everyone got excellent looks. While watching the jays, a covey of California Quail scurried off into the bitterbrush; a Northern Flicker entered a nest box by the Episcopal church; and a Violet-green Swallow perched on a nearby roof, giving us a glowing display of both the violet and green colors on its dorsal surface.

A little deeper into the ponderosa pine forest, we stopped at a large isolated stand of aspen trees, which contains a nice mix of age classes and hence plenty of mature trees with heart rot. This makes them perfect for woodpecker excavation, and we experienced yet another fabulous experience in Woodpecker Wonderland. An active pair of Williamson's Sapsuckers repeatedly tended a nest, while a White-headed Woodpecker distracted us as it fed in the ponderosa pines nearby. Also nesting here were Northern Flicker and Hairy Woodpecker, as well as the cavity-nesting Western Bluebird, White-breasted and Pygmy Nuthatches, and multiple House Wrens. On the periphery of the aspens, we enjoyed singing Townsend's Solitaire and Green-tailed Towhee.

After a lovely picnic lunch in Cold Springs Campground, we headed up the McKenzie Highway in search of burned stands from the recent Milli fire. As we headed west, a Cooper's Hawk blazed across the road, our only one of the trip. In the burn, we birded through a bit of the typical afternoon doldrums, though another Black-backed Woodpecker made a nice showing. We had time for one more stop, and one last try for the Three-toed Woodpecker at Trout Creek Swamp. It wasn't in the cards for us this trip, but we did enjoy good looks at Downy Woodpecker, Pacific-slope Flycatcher, and a Hermit Warbler singing from the canopy.

Mon., May 31: Departures

On our final morning, we all enjoyed one last meal at McKay Cottage, one of Bend's premiere breakfast spots. A final review of the checklist and fond farewells ended a stellar trip to some of the best birding in the West.

WILDLIFE SUMMARY

- 170 bird species, including 17 waterfowl, 13 raptors, 11 flycatchers, and 9 woodpeckers (besides Three-toed, the Pileated also eluded us).
- Daily or nearly daily species included Northern Flicker, Cedar Waxwing, Western Tanager, and Black-headed Grosbeak.
- 15 mammal species, including lots of pronghorn, many mule deer, and a river otter.

Photo Credits: Wetlands (Mark Cavallo - MC), Red-tailed Hawk (Sandy Sorkin), Osprey (Karen Enriquez), Black Tern (Steve Shunk - SS), Forster's Tern (SS), Yellow-headed Blackbird and Brown-headed Cowbird (SS), Evening Grosbeak (SS), Sagebrush Sparrow (SS), Yellow Lupines Malheur (SS), Black-crowned Night-Heron (SS), Marsh Wren (SS), Sora (SS), American Bittern (SS), Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel (SS), Great Egret & Trumpeter Swan (SS), Common Garter Snake (SS), Canyon Wren (SS), Black-headed Grosbeak (SS), Great Horned Owl (MC), Red-breasted Sapsucker (MC), Golden-crowned Kinglet (SS), Tiger Beetle (SS), Hairy Woodpecker (SS), Northern Pygmy Owl (SS), Red-naped Sapsucker (SS), Green-tailed Towhee (SS), Fox Sparrow (SS), Barrow's Goldeneyes (SS), Franklin's Gull (SS), Ring-necked Duck (SS), Black-headed Grosbeak (SS), Townsend's Solitaire (SS)