

# Photo Seminar in Oregon's Woodpecker Wonderland

## Trip Report | June 7-12, 2023 | by Kirsten Hines



**With guides Stephen Shunk and Kirsten Hines, and participants Becky, Bill, Carlo, Claire, Colin, Jeanne, and Peg.**



### **Wed., June 7      Arrival Sisters | Orientation | Deschutes National Forest**

Alpaca grazed in their on-site meadow as our group gathered at the Best Western Ponderosa Lodge in Sisters, Oregon for our inaugural photography seminar. We began in the conference room with introductions, followed by a presentation by woodpecker guru Steve on the natural history of the area and its woodpeckers, and by photography instructor Kirsten on the basics of wildlife photography. After everyone had a chance to check in, we passed the stunning Three Sisters peaks on our way into Sisters' quaint downtown area to enjoy an early dinner, timed in the hopes of photographing our first woodpecker nests of the trip in golden light. Clouds marred the gold during that first session, but the woodpeckers did not disappoint. A Pinyon Jay greeted us at a patch of the Deschutes National Forest mere minutes from our lodging where we spent our final hours of the day. An industrious Hairy Woodpecker pair repeatedly delivered grubs to their cavity nest, while pairs of Pygmy Nuthatches and Western Bluebirds tended their nests in the very same pine. In a snag not far away, a pair of Northern Flickers frequented their nest, greeted by the gaping bills of their hungry young emerging from the shadows to waiver in view. It was a promising start to the week ahead.



### **Thu., June 8      Calliope Crossing | Indian Ford Campground | Trout Creek**

Appropriately, a Calliope Hummingbird greeted us on creek-side vegetation as we crossed the bridge at Calliope Crossing early the next morning. We paused briefly to enjoy the scene before making our way through ponderosa pine forest to a spot at the edge where we set up our tripods with views of Red-naped Sapsucker and Downy Woodpecker nests, as well as a White-breasted Nuthatch sharing a tree with the sapsucker. After several photo ops with these species, we headed to nearby Indian Ford Campground for what was supposed to be a quick snack and bathroom stop but turned into an eventful photo session at a Red-breasted Sapsucker nest. Not only did we share in Steve's excitement at seeing both parents inside the nest cavity at once, but we also had wonderful visits from a Fox Sparrow, Yellow-rumped Warbler, and MacGillivray's Warbler. It was hard to pull ourselves away, but we ultimately returned to Calliope Crossing to photograph Williamson's Sapsuckers, Tree Swallows, and Northern Flickers tending to their respective nest cavities.





After a pleasant lunch in Sisters and a bit of down-time at the hotel, we reconvened in the conference room for a presentation by Kirsten on composition and post-processing before heading out for our evening photo shoot. We paused at the lovely Oliver Lemon's gourmet market in Sisters where everyone selected their own picnic dinner, then we headed to the Trout Creek area of Deschutes National Forest. We'd barely unloaded from the cars when a Red-breasted Sapsucker caught our attention. It flitted from bare ground to pine trunk, to grassy meadow, to aspen trunk, and back to the grassy ground, filling its bill with insects as we followed until finally, bill writhing with prey, it flew high and far, presumably to nearby waiting young. We made our way through open forest, past a Northern Flicker nest, and on to the evening's target – a Lewis's Woodpecker nest in a towering snag. We were presented with yet another novel woodpecker natural history sighting as not just two, but three adults appeared simultaneously in the tree above the nest cavity. Alas, all three flew before relations could be figured so, with stomachs rumbling, we opted to return to the picnic area for dinner.

### **Fri., June 9      Three Creek | Shevlin Park**

In the early morning, we picked our way through a charred landscape in the Three Creek Road area of Deschutes National Forest. This patch of pine was the focus of a prescribed burn the year prior, making it the perfect habitat for Black-backed and White-headed Woodpeckers. We set our tripods up in front of a known Black-backed Woodpecker nest cavity and waited, and waited, and waited. One parent did ultimately arrive, but it stayed high in the trees and left shortly thereafter, a reminder that there are no guarantees with wildlife photography. Fortunately, we had much better luck at a nearby White-headed Woodpecker nest where everyone captured images of this boldy black-and-white bird against a mosaic of reddish brown and sooted pine.



After lunch and a break, we began our first client review sessions at the hotel's conference room. Naturalist Journeys owner Peg Abbott kicked things off, selecting several of her images for group discussion while she took the reins, post-processing her images on the large screen with advice, suggestions, and constructive criticism from the group for a communal learning experience. It was a model to be repeated by each guest with everyone having a turn by the end of the trip.

We ventured farther afield in the evening, visiting Bend's beloved Shevlin Park where old-growth forest along the Tumalo Creek supports a high density of woodpecker nests. As if in demonstration, a Red-breasted Sapsucker flitted across the parking area to land by its nest cavity as we parked, and a Hairy Woodpecker called from its nearby cavity behind a veil of trees. Lewis's Woodpecker was the coveted species though, so we walked alongside the creek until we reached the perfectly lit snag of a known Lewis's nest. Tripods weren't even up before the owners appeared, and they came and went at regular intervals. A Pygmy Nuthatch nesting in a cavity just below entertained in their absence. The discovery of a Northern Flicker nest cavity on the other side of the snag provided additional excitement. The true highlight, however, was when Mr. and Mrs. Lewis mated on a limb beside their cavity, first one then the other claiming the top position. It was a sighting worthy of a toast when we dined at the Deschutes Brewery in downtown Bend later that evening.



## Sat., June 10 Jack Creek | Glaze Meadow

A Pileated Woodpecker nest was the intended star of the morning but the number of bird songs filling the air at the Jack Creek trailhead made it clear that there'd be many supporting actors. We paused in a meadow listening to a Western Wood-Pewee, then photographed Nashville and Yellow Warblers before continuing to our target – a surprisingly small hole high in a dead pine. A Yellow-rumped Warbler caught a moth, a Golden-crowned Kinglet flared its crown, and a hybrid Townsend's x Hermit Warbler caught our attention as we waited. The Pileated Woodpecker called from afar, rustled nearby shrubbery, then gave us a fleeting glance as it flew by. It took its time, but finally it returned to the nest tree. It landed by its cavity and an eager little head stretched out to greet it. We wandered farther down the trail to the source of the creek where clear water tumbled through moss-covered rocks, a scene more typical of the western side of the Cascades. A mother Hermit Thrush watched us from her nest, well-hidden in a Pacific Yew, as we enjoyed the setting. On our way back out, we couldn't help but pause at the Pileated Woodpecker nest one more time, and for a Black-headed Grosbeak that crossed our path.



After another excellent lunch in Sisters, followed by a break and review sessions at the hotel, we gathered picnic supplies from our favorite gourmet grocery and headed to Glaze Meadow. The sapsucker nest near the forested trailhead was quiet, but stunning views of the Three Sisters peaks across the green, purple-lily-studded meadow more than occupied our time. Tree Swallows soared above, and a Green-tailed Towhee posed for our group before we enjoyed our dinner below the pines.



## Sun., Jun 11 Trout Creek | Metolius River

On our final full day of the tour, we returned to the Trout Creek area, heading to a higher elevation with large tracts of pine forest bearing evidence of fire within recent years. We picked our way across fallen logs to set up our tripods in front of a Williamson's Sapsucker nest. One of the most sexually dichromatic woodpeckers in the world, it was a treat to photograph the mostly black, red-chinned male emerge from the nest cavity as the black-and-white barred female arrived to take his place. After a satisfying session with this pair, we explored further afield to photograph Mountain Chickadee, Northern Flicker, Mountain Bluebird, and a Yellow-rumped Warbler. It was getting late in the morning, but we ventured to the Millican Crater Trail on our way back to Sisters and were rewarded with photographs of a beautiful Western Tanager.



We had one last lunch in Sisters, followed by our traditional break at the hotel, and one final round of photograph review sessions before heading to the Metolius River for a slight change of pace. It wasn't

a woodpecker head that popped out of the evening’s nest cavity, but a Northern Pygmy-owl. Its large eyes gazed down at us several moments before it flew into nearby trees, allowing us a few more views. From here we continued to Wizard Falls where a family of American Dippers obliged our photographic desires, adults and young unabashedly hunting alongside the rapidly churning waters before us. A male Yellow Warbler stole the final moments of the evening, serenading us from an open perch until it was time to make our way to Camp Sherman for a heart-warming farewell dinner.



## Mon., June 12 Whiskey Springs | Departures

One of our group had to depart after breakfast, but the rest of us headed back into pine forest for one last morning of bird photography at Whiskey Springs on Green Ridge, an area that burned three years prior. Western Bluebirds, Western Tanagers, Cassin’s Finches, Mountain Chickadees, and more flitted in and out of the water. A Fox Sparrow hopped toward us down the road, and then we heard it – the call of a Black-backed Woodpecker. It was the one species that hadn’t cooperated at its nest; the one that had left people wanting more; the one we’d thought had gotten away. Looks became hopeful, but then disappointed as the call became distant. We scanned the trees, played a call, walked up and down the road, but there was nothing. Or was there? Did a dark speck just land in that distant pine? All eyes and efforts focused on that speck. It zigzagged closer, until there was no doubt – we had our Black-backed Woodpecker. It posed in good light against an appropriately charred snag just long enough to be photographed before our time was up, and it disappeared back into the woods. It was the perfect grand finale for our first photography workshop, one imbued with fun, friends, and many full memory cards.



*Photo Credits: Workshop Participants at Glaze Meadow (Peg Abbott); Hairy Woodpecker (Kirsten Hines, KH); Northern Flicker (KH); White-breasted Nuthatch (Becky Matsubara, BM); Red-naped Sapsucker (BM); Participants at Calliope Crossing (KH); Participants at Three Creek (KH); White-headed Woodpecker (BM); Carlo & Peg at Shevlin Park (KH); Lewis’s Woodpeckers (BM); Pileated Woodpecker (BM); Golden-crowned Kinglet (BM); Yellow-rumped Warbler (BM); Townsend’s x Hermit Warbler (BM); Glaze Meadow (KH); Green-tailed Towhee (BM); Male Williamson’s Woodpecker (KH); Williamson’s Woodpeckers (BM); Northern Pygmy-Owl (KH); American Dipper (KH); Black-backed Woodpecker (KH)*