



# WILLAPA WHISTLER

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Suzy Whittey 2013

Snowy Owl -- Image Suzy Whittey

## 2024 Breeding Bird Survey Summary

By Robert and Lisa Sudar

My wife, Lisa, and I did our usual breeding bird survey west of Longview on Sunday morning, the 16<sup>th</sup> of June. For those of you who might not recall, this is a bird count that involves both hearing and seeing birds along a specified route that is repeated yearly in May or June.

There are many such routes across the country and coordinated by the US Geological Survey. The particular route we do starts 5 miles up Abernathy Road west of Longview (several miles past the fish hatchery) at 4:50AM and proceeds through 50 3-minute stops down Abernathy Road to Ocean Beach Highway, along the highway to Oak Point, then headed north to Spruce Creek Road and onto the Old Cathlamet Highway which takes you over the hills and down into the Elochoman valley to the lower fish hatchery.

From there you proceed back toward the west as far as Foster Road, where you turn right and head toward Nelson Creek and onto Risk Road and

eventually back to Ocean Beach Highway near the Butler-Hansen Preserve. We then head west and turn onto Brooks Slough Road, where we complete the last four count stations and finish across from the boat launch just before you get to Skamokawa.

Those last stops used to be along the highway and ended at the boat launch but they allowed us to move the ending along the preserve about 3 or 4 years ago to avoid the highway noise which was making it difficult to hear any birds, nor did it feel very safe! This new bit is a nice change and actually has improved the count in several ways. Who says birders can't change!

The count has a variety of habitats so what you can expect to see varies a lot over the 24.5 total miles of the count but a good portion of the sites are a mix of habitats.

...continued on page 3

## Christmas Bird Counts 2024

This is a fun event for seasoned and new-be birders alike. All dates and events are preliminary as there might be changes and adjustments. We will have all the details on our website and in the Winter Whistler - published in early December.

- **Leadbetter (Pacific County)** – December 14  
contact Robert Sudar at [fallcreek734@gmail.com](mailto:fallcreek734@gmail.com) for more info
- **Wahkiakum** – December 30th  
Contact Andrew Emlen at 360-795-8009 to learn more
- **Cowlitz-Columbia**  
This year the Cowlitz-Columbia CBC will be **Saturday, December 28<sup>th</sup>**. Our count is centered just south of Rainier, OR in the Columbia River and includes the cities of Longview, Kelso, Rainier, and the old Trojan Nuclear Power Plant. We will have 8 or 9 areas within the circle that will be counted. We can always use Feeder Watchers who live within the count circle.  
Contact Becky Kent 360-560-0001 or [beckykt@comcast.net](mailto:beckykt@comcast.net) if you are interested.

## In this issue of the Whistler:

- Membership Form
- NW Birding Events
- Field Trips and Programs
- The Willet: Dull, but Interesting
- Mr. Swainson and Mr. Douglas  
Come Calling
- Ongoing Citizen Science at home  
"Project Feeder Watch"

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**Thank you for supporting your local Audubon chapter -- Willapa Hills Audubon Society!**

We will not share your contact information with anyone. For membership in National Audubon Society visit <https://www.audubon.org/> Chapter# Y14

\*) To announce **occasional** reminders and to communicate last minute changes due to weather or other issues for WHAS programs and field trips.

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 I prefer to receive the *WHISTLER* by email  
 Contact me about volunteer opportunities  
 Add me to your announcement email list\*  
 **I would like to support the work of Willapa Hills Audubon Society. Enclosed is my additional donation of \$ \_\_\_\_\_**

### Othello Sandhill Crane Festival 2025

The 2023 Othello Sandhill Crane Festival is scheduled to be held for **March 21-23, 2025**. Celebrate their return and discover why nearly 35,000 sandhill cranes choose Othello...  
 More info: <https://www.othellosandhillcranefestival.org/>

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### Olympic BirdFest 2025

**April 10-13, 2025**  
 The North Olympic Peninsula, a strip of prairie and forest between million-acre Olympic National Park and the Strait of Juan de Fuca, is widely known as a great place for bird watching.

The April dates of Olympic BirdFest are timed to overlap wintering birds such as Harlequin and Long tailed ducks, songbirds, and seabirds with spring migration.

Rufous hummingbirds arrive in this area from South America with the blooming of wild red-flowering currants in early April.

Field trips are planned for [Sequim Bay](#), Port Angeles Harbor, Ediz Hook, [Dungeness Spit](#) and the Elwha River, as well as trips through wooded areas and fields to view songbirds.  
 A [cruise around Protection Island](#) National Wildlife Refuge is available on Sunday morning.

More info and BirdFest registration at [www.olympicbirdfest.org](http://www.olympicbirdfest.org)

## Field Trip to Billy Frank Nisqually NWR

By John Green

Do you enjoy waterfowl, eagles, hawks and shorebirds? Join past Willapa Hills Longview members John and Margaret Green on a trip to Billy Frank Nisqually Wildlife Refuge, just north of Olympia, Washington.

We will meet in the refuge parking lot at 9:00 AM, Wednesday morning, January 22nd, 2025. The Refuge is roughly an hour's drive from Longview, at 15 exit 114. Be sure to dress for inclement weather, since January can be unpredictable.

We will spend 3 - 4 hours walking well maintained trails but if you don't wish to stay the entire time, you can peel  
**So, mark your calendars for January 22**

off from the group at any point. There are also benches available for relaxed viewing.

We did this trip a few years ago and saw lots of birds. Please RSVP by emailing John at [jgreen2317@aol.com](mailto:jgreen2317@aol.com)

Here is the link to the NWR web site to check it out: [Billy Frank Jr. Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge | U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service \(fws.gov\)](https://www.fws.gov/billyfrank). A \$3 per vehicle pass is required if you do not possess a senior or other pass for wildlife refuges and other public facilities.

### ...continued from page one: 2024 Breeding Bird Survey Summary

This year, we saw both Violet Green and Barn Swallows but the Barns were only on the west side of the hilly portion of the count this year. We also saw a Northern Rough-winged Swallow, which I think is new to this count (I got a pretty good photo of it and the best birder I know helped ID it) and a couple of Cliff Swallows.

Those were at the intersection of OBH with Oak Point and Darrel Whipple (who did this count for decades prior to us) I'm sure remembers that we had Cliff Swallows there in the past and usually if we had swallows up high enough that it was hard to see them clearly we considered them Cliffs. The habitat there has changed a bit over the last 20-25 years as trees have grown along the lower edges of bluff but we have identified Cliff Swallows there in the more recent past, too.

As usual, we encountered some species that we rarely see, and we failed to hear or see some we might expect to find along the route. Besides the NRW Swallow, we also saw a Tree Swallow and heard Pileated Woodpeckers (2!) and a Pygmy

Owl. On the other hand, we didn't find any nuthatches or Band-tailed Pigeons, though it's very likely they were in the area. They just didn't present themselves to us. But that's also typical – it varies from year-to-year. Last year we had three species of ducks but this year we didn't have any (though there also isn't a lot of duck habitat in our count area.) Overall, we had 57 species which is a good total for us.

And the habitat has also changed over the years. The large farms in the Elochoman valley are converting into smaller home sites. That creates habitat changes, unintentional or otherwise. And there is every reason to expect to see similar changes in the future, along with any climate effects. Bird counts like this one and the Christmas Bird Counts keep us alert to those changes. Citizen Science at work! And also this year, we were lucky to find a short window of rainless skies to do the survey. It rained the evening before, and started in again an hour after we finished. Snap!

#### Species Summary

1. American Robin	21.	Black-headed Grosbeak	41.	Pygmy Owl
2. Pacific Wren	22.	Eurasian-collared Dove	42.	Evening Grosbeak
3. Violet-green Swallow	23.	Willow Flycatcher	43.	Barn Swallow
4. Vaux Swift	24.	Rufous Hummingbird	44.	Red-winged Blackbird
5. Chestnut-backed Chickadee	25.	Purple Finch	45.	Common Yellowthroat
6. Pacific-slope Flycatcher	26.	Red-shafted Flicker	46.	Warbling Vireo
7. Western Tanager	27.	White-crowned Sparrow	47.	Turkey Vulture
8. Golden-crowned Kinglet	28.	Double-crested Cormorant	48.	Northern Rough-winged Swallow
9. Wilson's Warbler	29.	Cliff Swallow	49.	American Goldfinch
10. Swainson's Thrush	30.	Black-capped Chickadee	50.	Purple Martin
11. Song Sparrow	31.	Canada Jay	51.	California Scrub Jay
12. Cedar Waxwing	32.	Black-throated Gray Warbler	52.	Tree Swallow
13. Brown Creeper	33.	Spotted Towhee	53.	Great Blue Heron
14. American Crow	34.	Red-tailed Hawk	54.	Marsh Wren
15. European Starling	35.	Hermit Warbler	55.	Brown-headed Cowbird
16. Bald Eagle	36.	Yellow Warbler	56.	Black Phoebe
17. Steller's Jay	37.	Oregon Junco	57.	Western Wood Pewee
18. Belted Kingfisher	38.	Varied Thrush		
19. Red-breasted Sapsucker	39.	Pileated Woodpecker		
20. Common Raven	40.	Mourning Dove		



## The Willet: Dull, but Interesting

David Slater, Long Beach, WA

Willetts are shorebirds that may seem uninteresting, at least until you get to know them. But as we consider 3 or more physical and behavioral attributes of this shorebird, we are better able to recognize this bird and understand that being able to identify the Willet is important. Willetts can serve as a comparison species, helping us identify other shorebird species during field excursions. Here are tips for identifying Willetts in the field, plus other interesting facts.

Willetts are large, stocky shorebirds with dull grey plumage and a thick, long straight bill. Striking wing markings and piercing calls make the Willet one of our most conspicuous shore birds. In both the brown breeding plumage, and gray winter colors, Willetts show a bold white and black stripe running the length of each wing, in flight. The flight call is a loud *klaay-dr* or *klaay-dr-dr* and the *pidl-will-willet* song is rapidly repeated, mostly on breeding grounds.

Light barring on the breast and light mottling on the back may have you thinking, Greater Yellowlegs. However, Greater Yellowlegs are smaller than Willetts and their bills are slenderer. Relative size can be difficult to determine at distance, so before focusing your optics on a different bird, check out the color of the legs. Greater Yellowlegs have bright yellow legs as compared to the Willet's grayish legs.

Willetts often associate themselves with Marbled Godwits. If you are unsure whether you are looking at a Marbled Godwit or a Willet, the Marbled Godwit is buffier (almost cinnamon), unlike the drab grayish Willet. As body color alone often is not sufficient to solidify shorebird identification, carefully compare the bills of the birds you are looking at. The bill of the Willet is much shorter than the Godwit's and the Godwit's bill is two-toned, with reddish hues at the base. Look carefully. The Godwit's bill turns slightly up at the end.

If unsure as to whether you are looking at a Willet or a Whimbrel, note that the Whimbrel's bill is clearly curved downward, and the Whimbrel has a striped head. Willetts have plain head and as mentioned, a straight bill.

Understanding shorebird feeding and social behavior is helpful in differentiating them from other shorebirds. I often find Willetts alone, feeding or resting along the water's edge of rocky shores, marshes, beaches, and mudflats. In winter, you may see them feeding or resting along the water's edge. They usually walk steadily, pausing to probe for worms, small crabs, and other invertebrates. Their feeding is more methodical than that of



Willet – Image courtesy of Ian Davies / Macaulay Library

Greater Yellowlegs, though, on occasion, you might see one running with its bill in the water, catching fish. Willetts can feed both during the day and at night since they use the sensitive tips of their bills and not just eyesight. When disturbed, instead of flying, Willetts often make a piercing call, open their wings, and run. Note that they often sleep with their bill tucked under their wing.

During breeding season, Willetts birds move inland to the grasslands and prairies near freshwater, where they

feed on fish, aquatic beetles, and spiders. Pairs search for nest sites together. Typically, the male leads the female through the habitat. He makes small depressions which he scrapes out using his feet and breast. The female evaluates the suitability of the nest. Both parents incubate the eggs, but only the male spends the night on the nest. Like Killdeer, when predators approach, Willetts pretend to have a broken wing, so that they can draw attention to themselves and lure the predator away from their eggs or chicks. Both the male and female teach the young to feed. The female leaves the nest site about 2 weeks ahead of the male, leaving her mate to finish raising the chicks. Willet pairs remain together for several years and return to the same nest sites.

In summary, despite their dull grey color, Willetts are interesting shorebirds, especially when you examine multiple physical and behavioral attributes together. Identifying a Willet has excellent value in giving helpful clues that can assist us in identifying other shorebirds during field excursions.

## Mr. Swainson and Mr. Douglas Come Calling

By Robert Michael Pyle, Gray's River

*This new poem will appear in my forthcoming book **Swimming with Snakes: Encounters with the Actual World** (poems and prose) from Watershed Press in Seattle in 2025.*

As I sit in a clearing across from my home  
proofing the manuscript pages for this book  
older firs on one side, younger hemlocks on the other  
a Swainson's Thrush gives its late summer "whit!",  
that sweet little call that announces his arrival in May  
and his imminent departure in September;  
and a Douglas Squirrel churlishly skirls  
from a tree that bears the same name.

But now they want to drop all the people's names,  
for their sins. Audubon for a start, he's outta there..  
But don't stop with him—why not erase all the eponyms?  
Mr. Swainson will be gone, along with Mssrs. Wilson,  
Townsend, Clark, Lewis, Steller, Cassin, Say, Franklin,  
Ross, Cooper, Gambel, Forster, Kittlitz, Xantus, Allen,  
Hammond, Bewick, LeConte, Sprague, Hutton, Baird,  
Lincoln, McCown, McKay, Brewer, Lucy, Virginia,  
and Anna, just for starters—and if the mammals and plants  
follow suit, even David Douglas himself.  
All out! Along with the bathwater, the baby—  
and the history of natural history itself. One more brick  
in the wall between people and the rest of nature.

Hell, call them what you will, they don't care. But when  
I hear that sweet little "whit" in spring, followed by  
a beautiful upward trill a few days later, I will always say  
"Hello, Mr. Swainson! Welcome back, Mr. Wilson!"  
as I think of those first describers, and rejoice  
that their namesakes have returned once more.

*Editor's note: The opinions of contributors do not necessarily reflect the views of the Willapa Hills Audubon Society.*

### Ongoing Citizen Science at home "Project Feeder Watch"

Here is a fun opportunity to participate in bird related research, from the comfort of your home.

The **Project Feeder Watch with Cornell Bird Laboratory** will go from November until April, but one can sign up until the end of February. It runs for 21 weeks and involves counting birds at one's feeders or just in a bird-friendly habitat that one has provided. This is usually done in backyards. Birds are counted for two days every week or two (at least 5 days between a pair of counting days), and the results are submitted to the Laboratory for research and analysis.

There is a \$18 participation fee which covers some materials.

- Tools to track and learn about your birds on our website or mobile app
- Our year-end summary, [Winter Bird Highlights](#)
- Our double-sided poster of eastern and western common feeder birds (optional)
- Our calendar (optional)
- Digital access to the Cornell Lab's *Living Bird* magazine (U.S. participants)

You do not have to spend a lot of time watching; some people do it before and after work, or 5 minutes each hour, or whatever structure works for you.

For more information and to sign up, visit <https://feederwatch.org/about/project-overview/>

## WHAS Programs and Field Trips

WHAS events are free and open to the public (Unless otherwise noted). Check the website for the latest information and updates.

**Saturday, January 22, 2025**

**Field Trip to Billy Frank Nisqually NWR**

See the details on page three

**December 14 2024**

**Leadbetter CBC – see page one for the details.**

**December tbd 2024**

**Wahkiakum CBC – see page one for the details.**

**December 28 2024**

**Cowlitz Columbia CBC see page one for the details.**

Other programs and field trips will appear on our website and will be announced through our email alert system.

More information about the alert system here: <https://willapahillsaudubon.org/get-involved/member-services>

### The Whistler Online

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Articles, information, wildlife sightings and artwork are most welcomed. The deadline for submissions is the 15<sup>th</sup> of February, May, August and November. Send your

**Send in your stories & photos**

The *Willapa Whistler* is the quarterly publication of the National Audubon Society (WHAS), a chapter of the National Audubon Society. Complimentary copies are available for free on our website.

**Most WHAS activities and programs are open to the public.**

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