SWOC TALK

Jan-Feb., 1975

Newsletter of the Southern Willamette Ornithological Club Volume 1, Number 1

This is the first of, we hope, many numbers of SWOC TALK, the newsletter of the Southern Willamette Ornithological Club. We apoligize for any defects in this issue; this is the first newsletter we have ever produced and there is much yet to learn. Since this is the initial newsletter of a new organization, we have distributed it widely; not only have we covered Oregon, but copies have been sent elsewhere as well, including Illinois, Missouri, Maryland, Minnesota, and even the island of Tonga (in the South Pacific). We hope you find this first edition interesting.

DUES

Normally this depressing subject is reserved for a back page but we felt it would most logically follow the above discussion. In order to produce a newsletter regularly (bi-monthly?) and distribute it to members there must be a system of dues to cover these costs. At the first and sixth meetings of SWOC the members present decided that $5.00 per year was reasonable and sufficient for the cost of dues. A bank account is now being established to house all dues collected. Please make all checks out to "SWOC." The present mailing address is "SWOC, 10600 McKenzie Highway, Springfield, Oregon, 97477."

MEETING

On February 3, Ellen McMahon will present a slide-illustrated talk on the Great Blue Heron study that was conducted on the Oregon coast this past year. After the presentation, we will be able to question Ellen about further details of this project. Perhaps near the end of the meeting, if time allows, we will hold a discussion of the computerized field notes system that is being planned for use in the southern Willamette Valley. Meeting time is 7:30 PM, Feb. 3. Our meeting place is Rm 16, Science I, on the University of Oregon campus in Eugene. Signs will be posted but if you need further directions call either 747-7598 or 342-4161. We hope we see you there.

HISTORY

For the benefit of members who have missed all or most of SWOC meetings, we will briefly summarize the history of the Southern Willamette Ornithological Club.

In early August, 1974, the idea of an active bird club was expressed in several conversations between future members. It was generally agreed that there was a need for such a club. A first meeting was planned.

August 12, 1974 — First meeting. This meeting was largely organizational. With no disagreement on the need for a bird club, the discussion revolved around the goals of SWOC and the organization of meetings and officers. It was decided to keep SWOC as informal as possible, with no formal arrangement of officers. Also presented at this meeting was a tape of the Hooded Warbler, recorded near Monroe and a tape of the courtship song of the Black-headed Grosbeak, recorded in Eugene. Eleven people attended.

September 3, 1974 — Second meeting. This meeting was begun with a short presentation of a proposed cooperative field project dealing with the Wrentit (see next page). Following this, Tom Lund presented a talk on the Purple Martin project he has been conducting at Fern Ridge. Twelve people attended.

October 1, 1974 — Third meeting. This meeting was devoted entirely to preparing study skins of birds. Don Payne supervised members' efforts. Fourteen people attended.

November 4, 1974 — Fourth meeting. A Passenger Pigeon specimen was unveiled to begin the meeting. This specimen, an adult female supposedly collected in New York near the end of the nineteenth century, is now in Herb Wisner's collection in Eugene. A talk on the Bluebird Trail project presented by Aaron Skirvin was the major topic of this meeting. After this, the goals of SWOC were once again discussed with emphasis on the role SWOC can play in influencing city and county land planning. Fourteen people attended.

December 2, 1974 — Fifth meeting. Bird-banding and its possible use in local projects was discussed. Twelve people attended.

January 6, 1975 — Sixth meeting. The major part of this meeting was a discussion of the establishment of breeding bird surveys and censuses in the southern Willamette Valley. Discussion then shifted to the possibility of a newsletter (!) and the unavoidable topic of dues. Randy Floyd concluded the meeting with a presentation of the Red-tailed Hawk I-5 Distribution study he conducted this fall. Twelve people attended.

Although this summary is quite brief and admittedly crude, we hope that it will serve to aquaint all members with the type of topics discussed at Southern Willamette Ornithological Club meetings.

Wrentits in the Southern Willamette Valley, Oregon: a Problem of Subspecies Distribution

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A Cooperative Field Project Proposed to the Southern Willamette Ornithological Club

by Chip Jobanek, 26 August 1974

The AOU Checklist (1957) discusses the distribution of the Wrentit, Chamaea fasciata, in Oregon: C.f.phaea occurring along the coast and C.f.henshawi occurring north to the middle Umpqua and middle Rogue river valleys. Gullion (1951) lists sight records of Wrentits for Walterville, Crow, and Cottage Grove. It is these records that the AOU Checklist refers to when under the account of C.f.henshawi it states that "sight records from Waterville [sic] and Cottage Grove in the Willamette Valley may be of this race."

Since Gullion's article was published the Wrentit has been discovered to be a regular resident in parts of the Willamette Valley. Has the species increased significantly since 1950 or did Gullion merely miss the local populations? Regardless of how recently the species has invaded the valley what subspecies should valley birds be assigned to, the southerly interior henshawi or the coastal phaea? Within the past half-century several southerly species have increased their ranges northward into the Willamette Valley; it is possible that the Wrentit did so also. However, it is also possible that phaea spilled into the valley across the coast range; Banks (1964) considered such a route possible for the White-crowned Sparrow. The question of what subspecies occurs in the valley is crucial to an understanding of avian expansion into the southern Willamette Valley.

It is proposed to the Southern Willamette Ornithological Club that a cooperative field project be undertaken to solve the Wrentit problem so described. The project would involve different field methods which could be employed by individual members of the club.

1. Collecting. The basic part of the problem is what subspecies valley birds belong to. This would be easily solved by collecting a small number of individuals, perhaps from various locations throughout the valley.

2. Observations. The question of how far north and east the subspecies occur could be solved by observations, supplemented by collecting individuals outside of their recognized range. As the ranges of the subspecies are more completely understood suppositions can be made as to the likelihood of a subspecies to expand its range. Observational records could also be used to determine the methods of expansion of the Wrentit. Since the Wrentit is a sedentary species it might advance slowly, perhaps one territory at a time.

Any club members willing to assist with work on this project should contact me. I am assuming all responsibility for the project's direction.

Literature Cited

American Ornithologist' Union. 1957. Checklist of North American Birds. Fifth Edition. Port City Press, Baltimore, Maryland.

Banks, Richard C. 1964. Geographic Variation in the White-crowned Sparrow Zonotrichia leucophrys. University of California Publications in Zoology. 70 (1): 1-123.

Gullion, Gordon W. 1951. Birds of the Southern Willamette Valley, Oregon. Condor. 53 (3): 129-149.

Since writing the preceding short piece on the Wrentit I have investigated the problem more carefully. Harry Nehls has informed me of several reports of Wrentits in the northern Willamette Valley. Wrentits at bird feeders in Portland and Tigard, surely representative of the coast race phaea, speak clearly of the ability of the Wrentit to wander widely from its breeding area. Unlike these singular and infrequent occurrences, however, the Eugene population is a fairly large and stable one. This past spring, Colleen Sweeney estimated that there were about 15-20 Wrentits in the brushy growth immediately west of the Lane Community College campus. My principal question is, what are the origins of this population? Perhaps it is derived from a northward expansion of henshawi from the south. In 1948, Gordon Gullion considered Wrentits seen at Roseburg as representative of henshawi; their occurrence there he considered part of a general northward movement of Sonoran birds. The Eugene population might also, however, have been derived from coastal phaea, succeeding wanderings eventually resulting in establishing small populations. It is possible that after wandering to an area the Wrentit remains there permanently rather than return to its birthplace.

An intriguing puzzle is the subspecific identification of a Wrentit collected at Anchor, north of Grants Pass, reported by Gabrielson and Jewett. Although considered as the coastal race this individual was clearly in the range now recognized for henshawi. Was the specimen misidentified or is it another indication of the wandering ability of phaea? The question of Wrentit distribution is a fascinating one and I plan to follow up on it, when time allows, this year.

PROJECTS

One of the original goals of the Southern Willamette Ornithological Club was that it might serve as the coordinating body for the various projects being conducted by members. With the following list we hope to alert members of what types of projects are in progress and hopefully recruit assistance for these projects. While we cannot go into detail in this short list, you can recieve more information by calling Chip Jobanek at 747-7598.

List of current projects

Bluebird Trail project
Purple Martin Nestbox project
Computerized Field Notes
Summit Spring project
  actually several projects lumped under this handy title
Breeding Bird Surveys and Censuses
  also, all-year round censuses
Wrentit Subspeciation in the Willamette Valley
  see page 3 and above
Evening Grosbeak Feeding Flock Behavior
Horned Lark Distribution and Ecology
Migration Lists
Mapping Bird Distribution in the Willamette Valley
  a project that needs more attention

This brief list surely could not have completely summarized the active projects in the southern Willamette Valley; if you are conducting a study or know of someone who is, please call Chip at 747-7598.

SOME REASONS FOR THE DECLINE OF THE WESTERN BLUEBIRD POPULATION IN THE WILLAMETTE VALLEY

Gabrielson and Jewett (Birds of Oregon, 1940) wrote that "The Western Bluebird is a permanent resident and breeder in western Oregon, where it vies with the robin for first rank as a dooryard bird." Today, just 35 years later, the statis of the bluebird in the Willamette Valley has changed dramatically. At best it would have to be considered an uncommon resident and breeder, and a very difficult bird to find at anytime during the year. The decline in their numbers probably began in the early 1940's. And since the mid-1960's evidence of breeding has been almost nonexistent.

Eastern bluebirds, in southern Canada and midwestern U. S., have also suffered drastic population declines over the last few decades. In some areas they became so rare that people thought the bluebird was almost extinct. Some of these people started an all-out effort to "bring back" the bluebird to their areas. Beginning in the early '60's bluebird trails were set up to provide the needed nesting cavities. Many of the trails have been successful and actually have brought the bluebird back to its previous abundance. And each year continue to produce new generations of eastern bluebirds.

Two years ago the bluebird trail came to Oregon. Hubert Prescott of Portland developed his own western bluebird trail. Eugene followed Portland and started a trail last year. Apparently the long-range goal is to have a string of bluebird nest boxes from Portland to Eugene and of course each box supporting a pair of western bluebirds every spring.

The Eugene trail was established in February and March of 1974 and consists of about 200 nest boxes. The nest boxes were set out on fence posts and utility poles in the rural areas mainly to the south and southwest of Eugene.

It is unfortunate that the western bluebird, such a beautiful and delightful member of our avifauna, has become so rare over much of its range in western Oregon. The purpose of this article is to discuss some of the reasons for the decline of the bluebird population in the Willamette Valley.

Inclement weather during the breeding season or winter can have a significant impact on the bluebird population. Prolonged cool and rainy periods occurring during the nesting season will delay the reproductive cycle or even cause the bluebirds to abandon the eggs or nestlings. Some of the bluebird trail managers from Canada and Midwest have observed this in the eastern bluebird. I suspect that the three pairs of bluebirds (Eugene trail) abandoned their nestlings in June of 1974 because of several consecutive days of cold and rain. Apparently the cool weather reduces the insect population therefore forcing the adult birds to spend more time searching for food for themselves and less time to their nesting duties.

Severe winter weather creates a great hardship on western bluebirds. Snow covering the ground for several days or prolonged periods of below-freezing weather can cause a significant mortality in the wintering population. The "big snow" of Jan.-Feb, 1969 shows evidence of this sudden mortality. A land owner in Vida reports that for several consecutive years prior to 1969 blue birds had used one of his bird boxes for nesting. However, he has not seen a bluebird in the Vida area since the summer of 1968. A resident in the southwest Eugene area reports she observed a pair of bluebirds succumb to starvation and dehydration during the Feb. 1969 snowstorm. I also received a report that someone found dead bluebirds in a woodpile. Apparently the birds had taken refuge from the cold and died of starvation. I have no verification of this report, though.

Adverse weather is a natural limiting factor and will have only a short-lived effect on a healthy bluebird population. However, if the population is decreasing because of other factors, then the effects of this limiting factor may be long-lived or permanent.

Information available on the diet of western bluebirds indicates that they feed almost entirely on insects during the spring and summer. Other invertebrates such as arachnids and earthworms are also utilized. As expected, the intake of insects decreases in the fall and winter, but probably constitutes at least 60% of the diet. The balance of the winter diet consists mainly of wild fruits such as mistletoe, grapes, and elderberries.

The heavy dependence on insects as a year around food source has been detrimental to the bluebirds since the advent of pesticides. In the past, orchards were favored areas for nesting and winter feeding. However, if an orchard is sprayed with an insecticide it will no longer support bluebirds. The insecticide eliminates the food source--thus eliminating the bluebirds. Another aspect of the pesticide problem is the possibility that a continuous ingestion of insecticides could have a harmful effect on the reproductive potential of the bluebirds. I have found no evidence that this occurs in bluebird populations, although other species have suffered reduced egg-fertility rates. Any pesticide program implemented (from the home gardener to the land management agencies) will very likely be harmful to the bluebirds as well as other species.

Changes in land use, altering of the habitat, is another factor that has reduced the bluebird population in the Willamette Valley. Today, much of the land in the valley is used for the production of tall-grass agricultural crops; grass seed, hay, and cereal grains. It is doubtful that bluebirds will ever use these areas for nesting territories. Meadows and short-grass pastures with nearby trees and bushes for cover are preferred by the bluebirds. The best nesting habitat seems to be in the foothills adjacent to the valley. However, there are many areas in the valley itself that could support bluebirds if nesting sites (nest boxes) were provided for them.

Interspecific competition for nesting sites is an important limiting factor on the bluebird population. The "scourges from Europe", starlings and house sparrows, have been very effective competitors of the western bluebird. House sparrows have overran many of the farmyards and occupy most of the available nesting cavities in the farm buildings. The suitable "nooks and crannies" that haven't been claimed by house sparrows are used by starlings for their nesting activities. In the past, the farmyard was the site of the "first flight" for many fledgling bluebirds, but this is no longer true.

The abundant starlings have also taken over many of the woodpecker holes that could be used by bluebirds. The loss of these natural nesting sites to starlings has had a very damaging impact on the bluebird population. Many people have placed most of the blame for a decreased bluebird population on the starling. I too, agree with this. In the Willamette Valley the decrease in bluebirds has occurred simultaneously with the increase of starlings.

The relatively shy bluebird is no match for the belligerent and aggressive "scourges from Europe." There have been instances of house sparrows removing bluebird eggs from the nest--they have also been known to kill nestling bluebirds. I don't know of any records of starlings removing bluebirds eggs or nestlings. Undoubtedly they do for they will not hesitate "running off" a flicker from his freshly excavated tree cavity.

Also, these two "exotics" from Europe are permanent residents to the valley and begin looking for nesting sites in late winter and early spring--about the same time as bluebirds. In areas where starlings, house sparrows, and bluebirds occur together the bluebirds certainly get "left-over" nesting sites.

House wrens and tree swallows are the major native competitors of the bluebirds. However, I don't think they pose a significant threat to the bluebirds population. Since the bluebirds are permanent residents, they already began searching for nest sites before the swallows and wrens have returned from their wintering areas. The nesting dates we recorded on the Eugene bluebird trail shows that peak bluebird nest building activity occurs about the first of April. Peak swallow and wren activity is approximately one month later. Occasionally wrens

or swallows will displace nesting bluebirds but these instances are rare and insignificant. There have even been records of bluebirds displacing tree swallows. (We observed no displacement of bluebirds by any species during the 1974 nesting season.)

Even though the bluebird population has suffered a tremendous decline over the past 35 years I think there is hope for more bluebirds in the future. The bluebird trails will increase the breeding range and the population of the western bluebird in the Willamette Valley. Already, the trails in Portland and Eugene are having success--Hubert Prescott had about 30 pairs of bluebirds using the nest boxes in 1973 and about 70 pairs in 1974. The Eugene trail attracted 20 nesting pairs and fledged about 52 bluebirds in its first year. Hopefully in the near future bluebirds will be a common bird in the Willamette Valley.

Aaron Skirvin

The Southern Willamette Ornithological Club, or SWOC, is an organization representing the interests of bird students in the southern Willamette Valley. The goals of SWOC include:

- Conduct monthly meetings of ornithological interest
- Act as the coordinating body for local projects
- Participate actively in local governmental planning
- Act as a "sounding board" for new ideas and information pertinent to the study of southern Willamette Valley birdlife
- Distribute this information through the form of a newsletter and papers

Quite simply, SWOC is an informal discussion group which deals with the problems of Willamette Valley birds. We need your participation. Please consider joining SWOC and playing an active role in any of these stated goals. Address all letters to "SWOC, 10600 McKenzie Highway, Springfield, Oregon 97477".

This newsletter was prepared by Chip Jobanek and Aaron Skirvin and was printed by the Quick Copy Center of the University of Oregon.