

## Great Gray Owls in the Blue Mountains Trip Report

May 28, 2022; Erik Bergman, Trip Leader

No doubt about it: The Great Gray Owl excites and exasperates birders. Despite its large size, it can vanish unseen among the trees of its forest habitat. Although there are few guarantees in the natural world, a trip to the Blue Mountains in late May to its known nest sites is the closest thing to a sure bet to see this remarkable species and its young.

Twelve OBA members set off May 28 on just such an owl quest in the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, near Spring Creek northwest of La Grande. Our guide was US Fish & Wildlife Service biologist Laura Navarette, who has observed these owls for 10 years. She had arranged for Julia Boland from the Forest Service and local birder Mark Penninger to join us and share their expertise. Our destination was one of the nest platforms set up in a tall Ponderosa pine by the Forest Service to benefit the owls. The platforms have proven to be a great success.



We all met at the Spring Creek exit off I 84, then drove till the gravel road turned too rough and muddy. We then walked a half-mile or so with a gorgeous meadow of blooming camas on our right and a Ponderosa Pine-Western Larch forest on our left. MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRD and CHIPPING SPARROW flitted across our path. A pair of AMERICAN KESTRELS perched high in a snag. RED CROSSBILLS called everywhere in the treetops along with a singing CASSIN'S FINCH. Our good fortune was to find the mother GREAT GRAY OWL on the nest, where the fluffy heads of her two chicks popped up now and again. She seemed unconcerned by our presence and only occasionally glanced at us. We stayed about 100 feet back to take photos, scope the birds and savor the experience.



A short walk to a pair of forest ponds proved less than birdy, so we returned to the nest site to find that the mother had flown to a nearby tree, allowing us a fresh photo op of her and the owlets. All in all, we

spent three hours in the area. We were reluctant to leave, but our day was just getting started. [eBird Checklist - 28 May 2022 - Wallowa-Whitman NF--Spring Creek Rd. - 15 species](#)



Hilgard Junction State Park on the Grande Ronde River was our lunch stop, but there were too many good birds to see first. Almost immediately a GRAY CATBIRD and YELLOW WARBLER sang from the willows. A pair of AMERICAN DIPPERS entertained us below the highway bridge, with one bird feeding the other. From there we drove upriver to Birdtrack Campground where we added HOUSE WREN, VAUX SWIFT, DUSKY FLYCATCHER, BLACK-HEADED GROSBEAK and flyover AMERICAN WHITE PELICANS, among others. [eBird Checklist - 28 May 2022 - Hilgard Junction State Park - 8 species](#) [eBird Checklist - 28 May 2022 - Birdtrack Springs - 14 species](#)

On we drove to the Ladd Marsh Wildlife Area. At the Foothill Road viewpoint, we scoped a pair of TRUMPETER SWANS and many REDHEADS and YELLOW-HEADED BLACKBIRDS. A nice sighting was a NASHVILLE WARBLER skulking in the shrubbery. More visible was a family of SANDHILL CRANES with one gangly colt striving to keep up with its parents as they strode across a camas field. Both a GOLDEN EAGLE and a SWAINSON'S HAWK soared overhead. [eBird Checklist - 28 May 2022 - Ladd Marsh WMA--Foothill Rd. overlook - 19 species](#)

Along Hot Lake Lane we started to see shorebirds, notably BLACK-NECKED STILT, AMERICAN AVOCET, and KILLDEER. Also in the mix were CINNAMON TEAL, GREAT EGRET, COMMON YELLOWTHROAT and BULLOCK'S ORIOLE. [eBird Checklist - 28 May 2022 - 64864 Hot Lake Lane, La Grande, Oregon, US \(45.246, -117.988\) - 15 species \(+1 other taxa\)](#)

Turning on Peach Road we soon added DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT, MARSH WREN, and both WESTERN and EASTERN KINGBIRD. Two lucky people saw an AMERICAN BITTERN. [eBird Checklist - 28 May 2022 - Peach Road, Union, Oregon, US \(45.269, -117.954\) - 13 species](#)

Wilkinson Lane was alive with a huge variety of birds congregating at a flooded field. Where to start beyond the 100-plus gaggle of CANADA GEESE with their fluffy young? How about with new ducks BLUE-WINGED TEAL, GREEN-WINGED TEAL and AMERICAN WIGEON. For shorebirds we added GREATER YELLOWLEGS, SPOTTED SANDPIPER and WILSON'S PHALAROPE, plus a flyby of 14 WHITE-FACED IBIS. Careful scoping yielded EARED, PIED-BILLED and WESTERN GREBE. Keeping a sharp eye on the scene were a pair of RED-TAILED HAWKS and a PEREGRINE FALCON perched on a power pole. As we jumped in our cars, we heard a VIRGINIA RAIL call out as if saying goodbye to the humans. [eBird Checklist - 28 May 2022 - Wilkinson Ln. - 24 species](#)



For our final stop we decided to seek one of Oregon's uncommon grassland birds near the town of Union. There, along Godley Road, we scored a male and female BOBOLINK, with the male singing its sci-

fi effects song and posing nicely on a fencepost. What a great finale to a long and productive day! [eBird Checklist - 28 May 2022 - 57817 Godley Road, Union, Oregon, US \(45.219, -117.881\) - 6 species](#)



OBA thanks Laura, Mark and Julia for sharing their insider's knowledge of the birds, plants and animals of the Blue Mountains. Thanks, too, to the OBA members whose enthusiasm made the trip so enjoyable. Already it feels like we need a return trip during the 2023 nesting season!

*To visit the Great Gray Owls on your own, please contact the US Forest Service in La Grande. Staff there can give you the latest information. A printable brochure with ethical*

*birding guidelines and a map of nest platforms is on [their website](#).*

Submitted by Erik Bergman

*Photo credits: Mountain Bluebird, Gray Catbird and Bobolink by Nagi Aboulenein; Great Gray Owl adult and young by Francene Grewe.*