

Great Gray Owls in the Blue Mountains

Trip Report

June 2, 2024

By Erik Bergman, Trip Leader

Being in the right place at the right time can be spectacular. Amid the Ponderosa Pine forests outside La Grande, 11 OBA members marveled quietly at a pair of fluffy GREAT GRAY OWL fledglings, each perched in a separate tree. As we took long looks through our optics and snapped many photos, their mother suddenly flew in carrying breakfast, most likely a vole from a nearby meadow. With the prey grasped in her right talon she hooted softly for a few minutes from a high branch, then grabbed it in her beak and flew down to one of the young. In a flash she passed the meal to her young, who opened wide and swallowed it whole. Amazing!

This wildlife highlight occurred within the first hour of our field trip in the Spring Creek area of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. For the third year in a row, OBA offered this field trip to see Great Gray Owls at their nesting sites. We've seen a different nest each year and mostly had looks at owls sitting on eggs or the heads of owlets barely peering over the nest platform. This year we came just a day or two after these owlets had fledged by jumping from their nest.

platform. This year we came just a day or two after these owlets had fledged by jumping from their nest. Their parents have used a human-provided wooden



Great Gray Owllet #1 by Erik Bergman



Great Gray Owllet #2 by Erik Bergman



Feeding time by Jon Hazell

platform at this site for the past four years, we learned from Laura Navarette, the US Fish & Wildlife field biologist who has monitored these owls and served as our guide. The platforms were put up to expand nesting opportunities for the Great Grays in a forest where most of the larger trees they had depended on had been cut in recent decades.

We were awed by the owls and felt beyond fortunate to watch the adult feed her young. But owls weren't the only birds active in the forest: We heard CASSIN'S VIREO and HERMIT THRUSH singing, watched WESTERN BLUEBIRDS fly over a meadow, heard an OLIVE-SIDED FLYCATCHER order "quick three beers," and caught the rattling cry of a BELTED KINGFISHER below us over Spring Creek. As the

sun broke through the clouds Laura talked to us about forest practices, prescribed burns, owl ecology and a range of related topics. Many thanks to Laura, whose owl-finding ability and expertise helped ensure we enjoyed an enlightening experience that respected the owls' need for space. [eBird Checklist - 2 Jun 2024 - Wallowa-Whitman NF--Spring Creek Rd. - 15 species](#)

Saying goodbye to Laura, we descended to the Grande Ronde River at Hildgard Junction State Park to seek out riparian species. A singing GRAY CATBIRD was the star performer, although we wondered what had happened to its tail, which was utterly missing. Joining the chorus were WESTERN FLYCATCHER, CASSIN'S FINCH, BLACK-HEADED GROSBEAK and numerous YELLOW WARBLERS. We spent some time admiring a female BLACK-CHINNED HUMMINGBIRD. [eBird Checklist - 2 Jun 2024 - Hilgard Junction State Park - 13 species](#)

From there we drove upstream to Bird Track Springs, where river access is being improved with a gravel trail, bridge and viewing platform. We reacquainted ourselves with a CALLIOPE HUMMINGBIRD, who has ruled over his clump of shrubs for several spring seasons. Riverside highlights were SPOTTED SANDPIPER, DOWNY WOODPECKER, HOUSE WREN, and a busy WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH catching and subduing a large insect on the riverside logs. [eBird Checklist - 2 Jun 2024 - Birdtrack Springs - 23 species](#)

To refuel we took a lunch break at Red Bridge State Park, a lush green spot two miles farther up the Grande Ronde. While sharing home-made chocolate chip cookies and chunks of dark chocolate (you can never have too much chocolate!), we listened to HAMMOND'S FLYCATCHER, WARBLING VIREO, and a skulking MACGILLIVRAY'S WARBLER that proved impossible to see. Much more obliging was the PILEATED WOODPECKER that perched atop a bare snag for all to see and called loudly enough to be heard over the roar of the rapids. [eBird Checklist - 2 Jun 2024 - Red Bridge State Park - 6 species](#)



White-breasted Nuthatch by Jon Hazell

Leaving the forest and river behind we descended through La Grande toward Ladd Marsh, which presents an entirely different terrain and set of habitats. The viewpoint on Foothill Road presents a panorama of fields, marshes and hillsides. The wind had risen throughout the morning which subdued the army of YELLOW-HEADED and RED-WINGED BLACKBIRDS that were hunkering down in the cattails. An elegant male NORTHERN HARRIER showed off its gray, white and black plumage as it quartered over the fields. A SWAINSON'S HAWK took to the sky. Waterfowl included GADWALL, REDHEAD, NORTHERN SHOVELER, RUDDY DUCK and CINNAMON TEAL. Our tallest target stood out in the grasslands: a pair of foraging SANDHILL CRANES. Perhaps they had a colt nearby, but the grass was too tall for us to detect any young. As we departed, we were surprised by a small bird

that landed at the roadside: a ROCK WREN! [eBird Checklist - 2 Jun 2024 - Ladd Marsh WMA--Foothill Rd. overlook - 16 species](#)



Rock Wren by Erik Bergman

We checked on the healthy CLIFF SWALLOW colony at the barn at Glass Hill, then proceeded along to Hot Lake Lane, adding RING-NECKED PHEASANT, EASTERN and WESTERN KINGBIRD to our list. On Peach Road we stopped at the fishing pond, where in the past we've seen AMERICAN BITTERN – and our luck held, as one flew out of the cattails a few feet from us. A pair of BLUE-WINGED TEAL also took off, while the singing COMMON YELLOWTHROAT took no notice of us.

On the flooded field at Wilkinson Lane we added a pair of adult BALD EAGLES, GREAT EGRETS, a male WOOD DUCK and some BLACK_BILLED MAGPIES. The rain that had pounded Portland earlier finally reached us and spattered us enough that we pulled on raincoats. We did see a few BANK SWALLOWS, although their historic colony at the north end of Peach Road seemed deserted. [eBird Checklist - 2 Jun 2024 - Wilkinson Ln. - 22 species](#)

Back on Peach Road, a KILLDEER and WILSON'S SNIPE represented the shorebird clan.

Our last stop, where we hoped for a fitting finale to a great day, was Godley Road and a field known to host BOBOLINKS. We scanned a lot of birds perched on fence posts and power lines, such as SAVANNAH SPARROWS, before finally scoring excellent views of two males with their distinctive tan caps and white backs. Wow! [eBird Checklist - 2 Jun 2024 - Godley Rd. - 7 species](#)

Union County never disappoints as a place to see a broad variety of birds (88 species in all this day), across a variety of elevations and landscapes. Check our eBird Trip Report, [Great Gray Owls in the Blue Mountains 2024 - eBird Trip Report](#), for the day's tally of species and a map of our sites.

