



HARLEQUIN HAPPENINGS

Newsletter of the Olympic Peninsula Audubon Society (OPAS)

www.olympicpeninsulaudubon.org (www.olybird.org)

Clallam County, Washington

A Chapter of the National Audubon Society

Issue 2 Mar-Apr 2023

“Promoting Birding and Conservation as Community Educators, Volunteers, and Stewards”

OPAS Programs for March and April

March Program

“Why Washington Matters to Waterfowl”

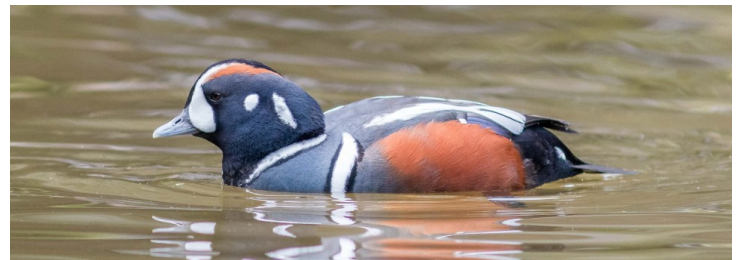


Kyle Spragens, WDFW

Presenter: Kyle Spragens, Waterfowl Section Manager, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, March 15, 2023, 7 p.m. at Dungeness River Nature Center

For a variety of reasons, the ducks, geese, and swans that rely upon Washington's waters and wetlands every year, are often taken for granted or unnoticed. Using insights and stories from projects across the Pacific Flyway, you will come away with a deeper appreciation and the urge to take a longer look at these migratory masters of the marsh.

Kyle is Waterfowl Section Manager for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and serves as technical liaison to the Pacific Flyway Council. His adventures with waterfowl span from the Canadian Arctic tundra to fishponds in Hong Kong's Pearl River Delta, including six years as a Wildlife Biologist for the USGS-San Francisco Bay Estuary Field Station, and three years as Senior Waterfowl Biologist for the USFWS-Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge in Bethel, Alaska. Kyle builds partnerships across the Pacific and East Asian-Australasian Flyways, addressing issues of nesting waterfowl, migration chronology, sea-level rise impacts to migratory bird habitats, and spatio-temporal dynamics of habitat use.



Harlequin Duck, Photo: Chris Perry

April Program

“Counting Cougars Creatively”



Mark Elbroch

Presenter: Mark Elbroch, Executive Director of Panthera, April 19, 2023, 7 p.m. at Dungeness River Nature Center

Cougars, also called mountain lions, panthers, and pumas, are elusive animals. They're really difficult to count, and yet such information is critical to address their conservation management and ongoing debates about the costs and benefits of living alongside them.

Join Dr. Mark Elbroch as he describes experimenting with new methods for counting cats, including locally with the Olympic Cougar Project, a large-scale, collaborative project co-led with the Lower Elwha S'Klallam Tribe. From the open landscapes of Patagonia to dense Pacific Northwest forests, we need information about these cryptic animals, in order to base our beliefs and decisions solidly on objective facts. Join us for a visual presentation on these beautiful animals, stunning landscapes, scientific innovation, and the ongoing challenges of counting cougars. *(Continued on page three)*

Harlequin Happenings is published six times a year. Consider “going green”. Receive your newsletter electronically, in living color, by contacting the OPAS Membership Chair, Audrey Gift, at 360-681-2989, or email aggift@gmail.com

The *Olympic Peninsula Audubon Society* meets monthly (except July, August, and December) on the third Wednesday at 7 p.m. at the Dungeness River Nature Center, 1943 West Hendrickson Road, Sequim, WA, 98382. The public is welcome.

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President's Notes

by Ken Wiersema



February snow

I am watching the snow melt out my window, as I get ready for our OPAS nest box class on Saturday. Fortunately, Dow Lambert and Len Zeoli have been working for several weeks to precut the nest box parts to prep for the class. Thanks to them both! Regrettably, the class will not be in the new "Cedar Hat" outdoor classroom because the weather delayed the concrete slab placement around the building. The class is full with a wait list and we are expecting a fun event. Seven of our OPAS members volunteered to help with box assembling. Thanks to them!

Swan Safe program

I encourage you to read John Acklen's update in this edition. John and Bob Phreaner continue to do excellent work collaborating with WDFW and the Clallam County PUD to make our Sequim-Dungeness Plain a safer place for swans to winter. Our swan survey teams led by Laura Davis and Liam Antrim have had a busy, productive swan season this winter. Those big white birds will be headed north before the end of March to reach their breeding grounds. Again, a BIG thanks to our dedicated swan counters who have donated many hours to this valuable and important program. We look forward to Kyle Spragens' March program on waterfowl in Washington. He'll surely include our swan work.

GBBC

Thanks to each of you that submitted bird counts to the Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) in February. When I last checked the count for Clallam County, I found we'd reported the most species in WA (by one). And, salutes to Sue Nattinger and Steve Kohler who submitted over 60 eBird checklists during GBBC. Super work folks! And, thanks to Bob Boekelheide for again instructing us and encouraging us to excel.

Trail support

In February, Kitsap Audubon asked OPAS to join them in supporting a grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation to complete a walking & biking trail that will finish the Washington link of a trail across the nation. The link will tie the Olympic Discovery Trail (ODT) which starts in LaPush, goes across our Railroad Bridge to Port Townsend, and then connects to a trail coming up from Kitsap County. We joined the ODT folks, Clallam County, and the Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe in asking for these federal infrastructure funds.

Zoom glitch in the February program.

I extend my apologies to our remote attendees who had an unsatisfactory experience at our February 15th program. There were several disconnects made in our management of getting the program to you. We've reviewed where we made mistakes and made fixes. I believe we will do better in the future. My thanks to Mary Porter-Solberg, Dee Renee Ericks, and Rhonda Coats for their dedication to learning the Center's new and quirky audio-visual system, and how it links to Zoom. So, don't give up on us. Mary did post a recording of the program on our web site.

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Reminder!

Time to renew your Annual
OPAS membership

President's Notes *(Continued)*

Volunteer needs Redux!

I renew my ask for those of you in our nearly 400 members to step forward and volunteer a bit of your time to help operate OPAS. We won't ask you to do anything you are not interested in doing, but we do need your help. We have a knowledgeable and dedicated group who have committed many years working toward the success we currently enjoy. So please let us know!

Contact me or any of our officers or board members. I look forward to hearing from you.

BirdFest '23

If you haven't registered yet, get with it folks. Many of the field trips and boat trips are full. Banquet and many of the classes have space remaining. Thanks to Vanessa and the BirdFest team for organizing and advertising this event. It will be great! Note the ad in this newsletter and on our website.

OPAS Program for April

(Continued from page one)

Mark Elbroch is a father, writer, mountain biologist, and Director of Panthera's Puma (Cougar) Program, for which he designs and implements cougar conservation research in North



Cougar, Photo: Joe Pontecorvo

and South America. Mark has contributed to mountain lion research in Idaho, California, Colorado, Wyoming, Washington, Mexico, Argentina, and Chile. His work with mountain lions has been covered by *National Geographic*, the BBC, National Public Radio, *The New York Times*, *Scientific American*, and *The Washington Post*, among others. Mark is twice a National Geographic Explorer, a 2011 Robert and Patricia Switzer Foundation Fellow (for environmental leadership), and the 2017 recipient of the Craighead Conservation Award for "creating positive and lasting conservation outcomes." Mark has also authored/coauthored 10 books on natural

history, including two award-winning books on wildlife tracking and the *Peterson Reference Guide to the Behavior of North American Mammals*. His most recent book is *The Cougar Conundrum: Sharing the World with a Successful Predator*, published by Island Press. More about Mark can be found at <https://markelbroch.com/>.



A message from the field trip chair

by Marie Grad, Field Trip Coordinator

Winter trips normally are done along the water, looking at wintering waterfowl. Ediz Hook, Dungeness Landing, Three Crabs and Sequim Bay are typical locations for these trips. I am still looking for individuals to lead field trips. I have one person who is interested and possibly one other. I will be working with the new leader to set up a trip soon.

Field trips typically last two to three hours, but can be longer depending on the location. Neah Bay trips are usually day long trips. Trips are organized through the OPAS website. The leader decides the location, hours, and the number of people permitted on the trip. Prospective trip leaders can look at back issues of the [Harlequin Happenings](#) to see the format that has been used for field trip descriptions. I would help do the write up for the trip and get it scheduled, if need be. If you would like to learn more about becoming a field trip leader, please contact me at mlgrad53@gmail.com or Bob Boekelheide at bboek@olympus.net.

Wednesday Morning Bird Walks

Date and Time: Every Wednesday morning at 8:30 a. m.
Meeting Place: Outside Dungeness River Nature Center
Features: Easy guided bird walk through Railroad Bridge Park to see birds of the Dungeness River riparian area and adjacent fields and open areas.
Bring: Binoculars, scope, water, snacks, and appropriate clothing for the weather.
Cost: Free

Conservation Matters: Project Swan Safe Update

by John C. Acklen, Project Manager



The overwhelming majority of our Sequim-Dungeness community enjoys and supports the Trumpeter Swans that spend their winter here. Each year since 2011, our Olympic Peninsula Audubon Society (OPAS) volunteers observe the swans and conduct a twice weekly swan census. *(Continued on next page)*

Harlequin Happenings

Our objective is to better understand and document where the swans roost, where they feed, what causes them to move, and to monitor their well-being. Our volunteer surveyors work from November through March to note when swans run into trouble from disease, lead ingestion, or power line collisions. Such was the case with recent swan electrocutions along Woodcock Road, just west of Kirner Pond, and along Holland Road off of Port Williams Road. In early January, Shelly Ament, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) biologist and John Acklen, OPAS's volunteer Swan Safe Project Manager, met with Mike Hill, Clallam County PUD's Engineering Manager. They met in the field to decide where the swan fatalities occurred and determine what could be done to prevent them.



*Trumpeter and Tundra Swans in a Schmuck Road harvested corn field.
Photo by John Gussman*

Subsequent to that, two more swans died from power line strikes near the intersection of Port Williams and Schmuck Road. PUD's crews responded quickly to mark the power lines with an array of avian bird diverters, according to the plan agreed to during the previous field meeting. Mike Hill and his crews also determined that it was possible to remove a third hazardous line which provided power to an unused irrigation pump. His crews completed the work by the end of January.

PUD's prompt response and willingness to work together with WDFW and OPAS has without doubt saved the lives of numerous birds, not just swans. It is a continuation of a collaboration among PUD, WDFW, OPAS, other non-profits and community members to underground a power line causing swan fatalities at Kirner Pond, fully described in a poster, [click here](#).

We prepared this poster to display at the October 2022 International Swan Society meeting in Wyoming, where it received rave reviews. It highlights our unique local cooperation. We see the fruit of this approach in the recent utility responses. Not only was the work accomplished quickly, but it demonstrates the new care and attention of PUD crews. These PUD

actions reflect not only a willingness to comply with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which protects birds, but also a sincere and growing commitment to bird well-being. In February, OPAS sent a letter to the General Manager of the PUD thanking them for their responsive actions and cooperation.

Backyard Birding Programs for March and April

by Rhonda Coats



After a long hiatus due to COVID concerns and building construction, our OPAS Backyard Birding programs return for in-person instruction in the newly remodeled Dungeness River Nature Center in Sequim. The eight-part 2022-23 program series will feature information on wild bird identification, biology, feeding, nesting, and habitats of the Olympic Peninsula. The classes are developed for folks new to birding and to our region, as well as for those who wish to hone their bird knowledge and skills. Admission to the series is free; however, we suggest a donation of \$5.00 per person to support our ongoing education and bird conservation programs.

March Program

"Sounds of Spring"

Presented by Dow Lambert & Ken Wiersema
Saturday, March 4, 2023,
10:00 a.m. to noon
Rainshadow Hall at
Dungeness River Nature
Center



Common Yellowthroat by Dow Lambert

Next up in our Backyard Birding programs will be *Sounds of Spring*, presented by veteran birder and photographer, Dow Lambert, with the assistance of Ken Wiersema. Dow's excellent local photos as well as his sound and video recordings will increase and refresh your knowledge of the bird songs and calls of spring heard throughout our local yards, fields, forests, and shores. Dow and Ken will also introduce you to the free Merlin Sound ID app offered by the Cornell Ornithology Lab.

April Program

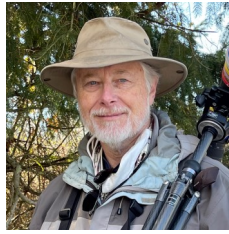
"Migration"

Saturday, April 1, 2023, 10:00 a.m. to noon

Check the [OPAS website](#) for updated information.

Dungeness Data: The Great Blue Herons of Dungeness Bay

by Bob Boekelheide



In place of the former Bird Sightings column, Bob is exploring data from OPAS Community-Science Projects. If you are interested in local bird sightings, check out eBird at <https://ebird.org/explore>, then under "Explore Regions" enter Clallam or Jefferson County. Please add your own sightings to eBird as well.

While birding recently at Three Crabs, it surprised me to see only one Great Blue Heron foraging on the giant mudflats. Where are the herons? There were thousands of Dunlins and hundreds of gulls, but only one heron. Are the herons disappearing? Or is it normal to see fewer herons this time of year?

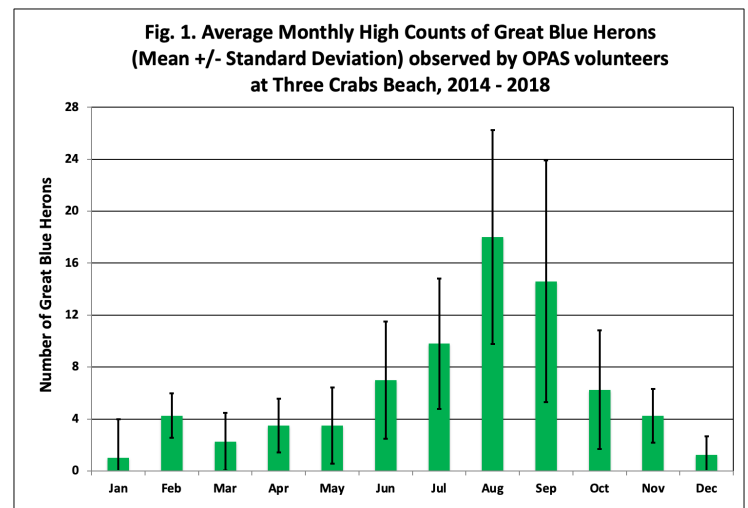
Fortunately, the answers to these questions come from OPAS citizen science projects. Between 2014 and 2018, OPAS volunteers counted birds at Three Crabs as part of the Three Crabs Estuarine Restoration Project, coordinated by the North Olympic Salmon Coalition and WA Dept. of Fish and Wildlife. During this study, OPAS volunteers counted birds at Three Crabs three times each month for five years, tallying all the birds we could find within about a hundred-acre area on the mudflat, beach, and bay, including Great Blue Herons.



Great Blue Herons foraging in Dungeness Bay.
Photo by Bob Boekelheide

Great Blue Herons are definitely a common species in Dungeness Bay, easily visible as they hunt in shallow water or roost in uplands above the beach. Despite this visibility, we found that herons are not here all the time. Over five years, we found that they only occurred on 81 percent of our 152 surveys at Three Crabs.

We found that herons have a very distinct annual cycle in Dungeness Bay, with their lowest numbers here in winter and spring (Figure 1). Their abundance picks up through June and July to a clear peak in August and September, when they disperse from their nesting colonies (Figure 1). Yes, we have herons here year-round, but if you want to see lots of herons you need to look in late summer, not late winter.



During our five-year study, the highest count within our small study area occurred on August 27, 2018, with 26 herons. Coincidentally, the highest count anywhere in Clallam County, as found in eBird, was 66 herons observed in Dungeness Bay on September 4, 2021, right around the same time of year.

Great Blue Herons showed no increase at Three Crabs during the nesting season, simply because they usually do not nest in Dungeness. At their nesting colonies in other parts of the Salish Sea, they occupy territories and start building nests during winter, then lay eggs in March and April. The highest numbers we see in Dungeness Bay in August and September coincide with the time of year when herons disperse from their nesting colonies, including recently-fledged juveniles.

The largest heron colonies within 50 miles of Clallam County are likely on the shores of Padilla Bay in Skagit County, where there are hundreds of nests clustered in trees at March Point and Samish Island. *(Continued on next page)*

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During the nesting season, herons forage all over the mudflats and shallow waters of Padilla Bay. The closest colony of any size to Clallam might be at Beacon Hill Park in Victoria, B.C., about 20 miles as the heron flies. The Beacon Hill Park heronry has had a difficult past, though, sometimes abandoned because of eagle predation.

Great Blue Herons try to nest in Clallam County, but as far as we know nearly all recent nesting attempts have failed. Herons have built nests in trees at Three Crabs, along the Dungeness River, up Palo Alto Road, at Diamond Point, and near Neah Bay and Clallam Bay. Within a few days or weeks the birds usually abandoned their sites. Perhaps these were young, inexperienced birds that couldn't resist the urge to gather sticks and build nests, but they never seemed to reach the point of fledging chicks. Does anyone know of successful Great Blue Heron nesting attempts in Clallam County? If you do see herons trying to nest, it's important to give them space and not disturb them.



Great Blue Heron standing in a nest beside the Dungeness River, June 2020. Photo by Bob Boekelheide

One of the most interesting Clallam nesting records comes from Hank and Raedell Warren of Port Angeles. In 2013, while walking up the Lake Angeles Trail south of Lake Dawn, Hank and Raedell heard strange squawking sounds in the coniferous forest at about 2500 feet elevation, more than five miles flying distance from the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Looking closer, they discovered that the sounds came from half-grown Great Blue Heron chicks sitting in three nests high in the Douglas-firs. Why in the world would Great Blue Herons nest so far up in the Olympic Mountains?

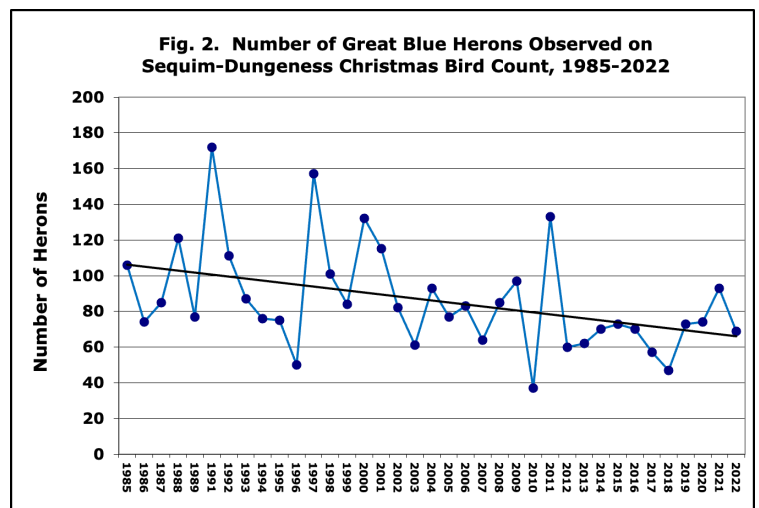
The answer likely came the following year, when Hank walked to the same spot during spring 2014. Hank found the nests, but he also discovered eggshells and feathers scattered on

the ground below the nests. There were no herons to be seen. What he found instead were three Bald Eagles flying through the forest and landing near the nests. Like Hank said, "The eagles and feathers explain the absence of herons." A year before we thought these herons might have figured out how to avoid eagle predation by nesting in an obscure, out-of-the-way place, but the eagles eventually found them.

As you might have guessed, Bald Eagles have a huge influence on the nesting success of Great Blue Herons. For example, the colony at Beacon Hill Park in Victoria, B.C., has a checkered history of abandonment because of eagles. The interpretive signs below the park's nesting area even delineate what they call the "Eagle Period," when Bald Eagles appear at a specific time in the herons' nesting cycle to eat chicks in the nests. The herons have no defense against marauding eagles.

In Dungeness Bay I also witnessed an eagle kill an adult Great Blue Heron, by quickly swooping down from the sky and landing on the heron's back. I suspect the heron may have already been injured, though, because it made no attempt to fight back or escape.

Data from the Sequim-Dungeness Christmas Bird Count show a distinct decrease in the number of Great Blue Herons counted over the last 30 years (Figure 2). There is quite a bit of variability between years, however, which is typical of Christmas Bird Counts. After all, it is tough to control things like weather, tides, and counters each year. Regardless, herons dropped from an average of about 100 per year during the 1990s to an average of about 70 per year during the last 10 years. This is consistent with declines in herons elsewhere in the Pacific Northwest, as described in *Birds of the World*. Could some of these declines be due to increased numbers of Bald Eagles?



The Great Blue Herons we see in Clallam County are likely the Northwest coastal subspecies, *Ardea herodias fannini*, which nests from southeast Alaska to Washington state. *A. h. fannini* is the darkest gray and one of the larger Great Blue Heron subspecies, which fits in with our darker, more northerly climes. This subspecies is mostly considered non-migratory, although they disperse widely through coastal areas of the Salish Sea after nesting, including the north Olympic Peninsula. The entire population of *A.h. fannini* might number 8,000 to 10,000 birds, with about half of those nesting in Washington State.

Hérons basically eat whatever animals they can catch, including fish, mammals, birds, amphibians, and crustaceans. In Dungeness Bay I've seen them eating flatfish, sculpins, gunnels, crabs, and what looked like smelt or perch. Herons are unwelcome visitors at backyard fish ponds and local hatcheries, where they may gobble down lots of fish very quickly. But seriously, don't you think it is a noble end for your prized koi to end up in the belly of a Great Blue Heron?

It's always entertaining to watch a heron try to swallow a big starry flounder, grossly stretching their throat to accommodate the fish. Sometimes herons bite off more than they can chew, as there are records of herons choking to death trying to swallow large prey items.

The oldest banded Great Blue Heron on record was 23 years old, but very few likely get that old. A demographic study in a British Columbia colony found that the average age of nesting adults was 5.6 years old. Most herons begin nesting in their second year, so an average adult might be lucky to nest for four or five years during its lifetime. Their average clutch size in British Columbia was about four eggs, but so many nests failed that the average number of chicks fledged per nesting attempt was two or less. Additionally, banding studies show that the majority of young herons die within their first year after they leave the nest. It's not easy being a heron.



Great Blue Heron with a captured starry flounder.
Photo by Dow Lambert

Lastly, I'd like everyone to keep an eye out for "Carte Blanche," a partially-leucistic Great Blue Heron that's been seen in Dungeness Bay for the last couple years. It stands out from the crowd, because, unlike a typical gray GBH, this one has a bright white belly and white markings on its head. The white belly is somewhat reminiscent of a Tricolored Heron, but its size and behavior are clearly Great Blue Heron. My wife, Barb, named the bird "Carte Blanche," or "Blanche" for short.

Spring is here, and so are bird songs. Every spring is precious, when the Earth comes alive with life and sounds. You must go birding! Learn the bird songs! If you see or hear anything of interest, please let us know on the OPAS website: <https://olympicpeninsulaudubon.org/contact-us>

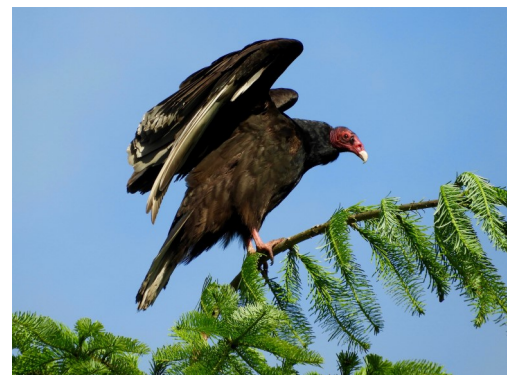
Many of the interesting facts about Great Blue Herons in this story came from **Birds of the World**, an on-line resource available through Cornell Lab of Ornithology. I highly recommend that all bird aficionados get an online subscription to **Birds of the World**, both for its wonderful information and to support the Lab of Ornithology.

Gallery of birds

Here are a few migrants we should all be looking for this spring.



Rufous Hummingbird on nest
Photo by Bob Boekelheide



Turkey Vulture
Photo by Bob Boekelheide

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Orange-crowned Warbler
Photo by Bob Boekelheide



Townsend's Solitaire
Photo by Bob Boekelheide

Recent Nest Box Class

Photos by Dee Renee Ericks

On Saturday, February 25, 2023, the Nest Box Class built 26 boxes, and sold 3 kits, raising \$725 toward the operation of the Dungeness River Nature Center. Here are a few photos of that event.:



One box builder admiring her work.



Dow Lambert advising some moms and kids on next steps



Dan Wilson preparing an entry hole in the front of a box



Ken Wiersema helping to secure a roof

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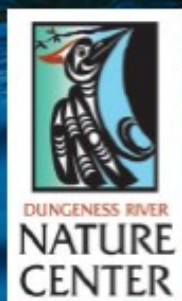
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