



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 5 Sept—Oct 2023

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

OPAS 50th Anniversary

On the 20th of September, OPAS will be celebrating our 50th year of working for birds on the Olympic Peninsula. **OPAS members** will receive an invitation to the event with an RSVP request. If you wish to attend, please reply, as we'll have to limit attendance to the capacity of Rainshadow Hall. We're planning to offer food and beverages as part of a celebratory program featuring John Gussman's photos and snippets of OPAS history. [Register online.](#)

OPAS Program for October

by Tom Butler, Co-Vice President

“Feiro Marine Discovery Center Project”

*Presented by: Melissa Williams, Executive Director of Feiro Marine Life Learning Center
 Dungeness River Nature Center, Wednesday, October 18, 2023, 7:00 p.m.*



Melissa Williams

Melissa Williams, Executive Director at Feiro Marine Life Center, will present conceptual plans for the Marine Discovery Center Project, a collaborative aquarium and visitor services center with NOAA Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary. This 13,000 sq. ft. education facility will be located on the Port Angeles Waterfront Center campus in downtown Port Angeles, alongside the newly opened Field Arts and Events Hall. Special attention will be paid to the seabird aviary exhibit, including design, animal collection policies, research, local citizen science projects, and seabird conservation.

Melissa came to Feiro in May, 2014, after holding positions at the John G. Shedd Aquarium in Chicago, the University of Arizona Flandrau Science Center in Tucson, and the Adler Planetarium in Chicago. Her academic background includes degrees from New College, Florida, and the University of Illinois at Chicago. Come join us for this informative presentation.



Harlequin Duck – Photo courtesy of Dave Shreffler and Ann Soule

**Olympic Peninsula Audubon Society
 invites you to celebrate our 50th
 Anniversary!**



**Open House Celebration
 September 20, 2023 from 5 to 8 pm
 Dungeness River Nature Center
 1943 Hendrickson Road, Sequim
 Refreshments will be served.
 Space is limited. RSVP ASAP
 Register no later than September 13**

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.

OPAS Board of Directors

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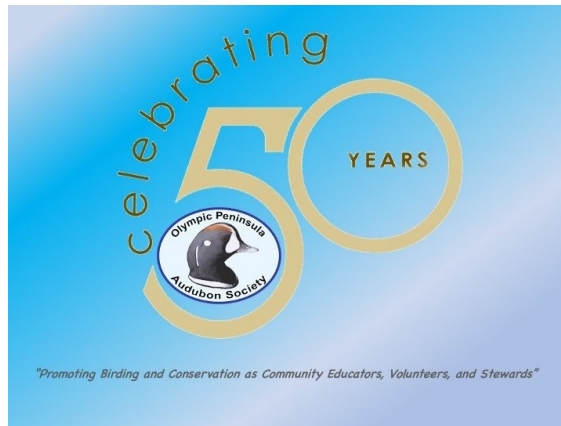
president@olympicpeninsulaudubon.org

President's Notes

by Ken Wiersema

OPAS's 50th!

In 1970 a group of some 10 folks met with Hazel Wolf, then secretary of Seattle Audubon, who was a consummate organizer, and decided to form a new chapter on the Olympic Peninsula. That group determined the needed leaders and submitted an application to the National Audubon Society, to establish the Olympic Peninsula Audubon Society. We received our charter from National dated 1st of December 1972, and held our first official meeting in Sequim on January 1973. Today, some 50 years later we've grown to over 400 members and



have become recognized as established leaders in bird education, documenting bird data, and science-based environmental advocacy. You folks deserve a party for what you've supported and accomplished. So, on Wednesday Sep-

tember 20th, please join our celebration. You received your invitation in the mail last week. Please RSVP, so we'll be sure to have enough food and refreshments. Note: A waitlist has been enabled for this event. If you need to cancel your reservation, please email webmaster@olympicpeninsulaudubon.org. Look forward to seeing y'all!

Leadership changes

On Aug 17th your OPAS leaders spent a productive day reviewing our past year's activities, plus planning and resourcing our 2023-24 year. We also enjoyed an excellent potluck lunch prepared by board members, and organized by Audrey Gift. Starting this month, we'll have 2 Co-Vice Presidents. Tom Butler will continue in his role of developing programs for our monthly meetings, and Katja Bridwell will assume the role of assisting in the managing of operation of OPAS's education, administrative, and conservation activities. Our intent is to better balance the workload among leaders. Also, we bid farewell to Sara Ellen Peterson as our Publicity Chair. We thank her for many years of cultivating a working relationship with local media, and responsively getting out the word on OPAS events and programs. Rhonda Coats has generously agreed to become our Publicity Chair as Sara Ellen retires. Rhonda has for the last several years been our publicity lead for the Backyard Birding programs, and has established a good network of outlets to keep both our members and the community aware of upcoming OPAS programs. (Continued on page three)

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Please be aware!

The Hurricane Coffee Bar in the Dungeness River Nature Center will be open at 6:30 p.m. on the nights of OPAS programs. So, come a bit early, enjoy a refreshing coffee or tea, and check out the new programs coming to the Center.

President's Notes (Continued from page two)

So again, our thanks to Sara Ellen and to Rhonda. Well done!

Being a part of the OPAS leadership team is a fun and rewarding experience, yes there's also some work involved. We're part of OPAS because we believe in the conservation and protection of birds and their habitat. You can take the extra step to contribute your time and skills to making us better. Please contact me or any of our board if you want to learn more about OPAS leadership opportunities.

Dungeness River Festival

September 22, 2023 - 9:30 a.m. – 2:30 p.m.

This year the program will be confined to one day. OPAS has agreed to be the lead for a scavenger hunt for the birds and animals in the Dungeness River watershed as depicted on the Tim Quinn mural. The mural was previously painted on the east wall of the remodeled exhibit room. The painting was digitally photographed and printed on an all-weather fabric now hung on the outside western wall of Rainshadow Hall. Marie Grad carefully searched the print and prepared a master list of what is on the wall. We'll need a few OPAS birders to help organize the school groups who will be invited to River Fest, and assist the kids in finding the wildlife as depicted in the panel. We'll also get out the old "check your wing span" banner and have it nearby. If you'd like to help with this event please contact me or Marie. It is always a fun day.

OPAS FIELD TRIPS: September - October

Please Note: Olympic Peninsula Audubon Society is instituting a new policy for in-person field trips. We are asking for field trip participants to sign a liability release form on or before the day of the trip. This signed form will be good for future field trips. The form will not be necessary for the Wednesday Bird Walks. You can review, download, and print the form in advance by [clicking here](#). You can also eSign the liability release form by [clicking here](#).

A Message from the Field Trip Chair

By Marie Grad



We have several field trips scheduled for September. John Gatchet is leading a Field trip to Carrie Blake Park on September 10th. Bob Boekelheide is leading a trip focusing on Dungeness Bay on the 16th of September. Kathy McCoy is leading a trip to Peabody Creek on September 19. At the end of September, Skip Perkins is leading a trip to John Wayne Marina and Diamond Point on the 28th. Skip's field trip is geared toward participants with disabilities.

At this time, there are two trips scheduled for October. Kathy McCoy is leading a trip to Port Angeles Harbor and Ediz Hook on October 10th. Skip Perkins is leading a trip to Salt Creek County Park and the Elwha River Mouth on October 19th.

For more information and to sign up for any of these field trips, go to the Events Calendar on the Olympic Peninsula Audubon Society's website.

Due to their popularity, a waitlist has been added to each of these trips. If you are unable to attend a Field Trip that you have signed up for, please email the [OPAS webmaster](#) or the field trip leader so that someone else can attend. If you wish to lead or assist with field trips, I can be contacted through the website or at mlgrad53@gmail.com.

Wednesday Bird Walks

Date and Time: Every Wednesday morning at 8:30 a.m.
Meeting Place: Outside the 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

Carrie Blake Park

Date and Time: Sunday, September 10, 2023, 8:30-10:30 a.m.
Leader: John Gatchet.
Number of participants: 18 - Register online [here](#).
Meeting Place: Carrie Blake Dog Park parking lot at 8:30 a.m.
Features: Ponds, open fields, hedges, and riparian edges contribute to some excellent birding potential.
Special Requirements: We will be walking some distance around the park so wear good shoes and clothes appropriate for the weather conditions.
Liability form: See message from OPAS Field Trip chair.
Further Information: If needed, contact John Gatchet at jfgatchet@gmail.com or at (503) 781-5043.
Cost: Free *(Continued on next page)*

Harlequin Happenings

Dungeness Bay: Shorebirds, Gulls, and Waterfowl

Date and Time: Saturday, September 16, 2023. Meet at Three Crabs WDFW parking lot at 7:00 a.m.

Leader: Bob Boekelheide

Number of participants: 20 - Register online [here](#).

Cost: Free

Meeting Place: Start at Three Crabs WDFW parking lot (at west end of Three Crabs Rd) at 7:00 a.m. After surveying Three Crabs birds, we will travel to Dungeness Landing County Park, on Oysterhouse Rd off Marine Drive.

Features: Bird migration is in full swing as summer transitions to fall. Our main targets will be shorebirds, waterfowl and love-ly gulls that use the mudflats and estuary near the mouth of the Dungeness River.

Special Requirements: We'll have to hop a few beach logs to access Three Crabs beach. Dungeness Landing Park is accessible to all.

Further information, if needed: Contact Bob Boekelheide at bboek@olympus.net.

Peabody Creek Trail Field Trip

Date and Time: September 19, 2023, 9 a.m.–1 p.m.

Leader: Kathy McCoy

Participant limit: 10 – Registration required. Register online by [clicking here](#). Signed Liability Form required (See message from Field Trip Chair).

Meeting Place: Meet at the Olympic National Park Visitors Center parking lot at 3002 Mount Angeles Road, at the end of Race Street at 9 a.m. There is construction on Race Street between 7th and Park Ave, follow detour signs as needed. A National Park Pass is not required for the parking lot.

Cost: Free

Features: I invite you to join me on a bird/nature walk on the Peabody Creek trail. It's a 5.2 mile round trip, up Peabody Creek and back. I won't make any promises about what birds will be present, probably the usual suspects such as ravens, Steller's Jays, flickers, juncos, and Song Sparrows. Migrants are moving around though. I saw a Wilson's Warbler last week, and more Black-headed Grosbeaks have been to my feeders recently, as well as buckets of Pine Siskins. We will be stopping for plants, chipmunks, salamanders, and snakes, as well as birds, so get your naturalist hat on.

Special requirements: Wear shoes with good tread; the trail can be a little slippery.

Contact information: Kathy McCoy (208) 921-1340. Text or call if you have questions!

John Wayne Marina and Diamond Point Accessible and Inclusive Bird Outing

Date and Time: Thursday, Sept. 28, 2023, 9 a.m.

Leader: Skip Perkins

Meeting Place: John Wayne Marina - north end of parking lot.

Features: Wheelchair accessible preference will be given.

Number of participants limited to four wheelchairs, each with an accompanying friend.

John Wayne Marina features mostly flat, cement walkways with great views of water and shorelines. Benches and tables available along route. Lots of parking. Restrooms available. Diamond Point features 10-20 yards of grass to gazebo with great views of water, shoreline, and Protection Island. Short distance to inland pond. Flat.

Birds we may see include Black Oystercatchers, loons, Common Murres, auklets, grebes, and several duck species, cormorants, and gulls.

Registration and Liability form: Required (see message from the Field Trip Chair, Marie Grad).

Cost: Free

Further information: Call or email with any questions about the outing. Skip Perkins: (715) 580-0822, or perkinsskip2@gmail.com. Contact me if equipment is needed.

Port Angeles Harbor and Ediz Hook

Date and Time: Oct 10, 8:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

Leader: Kathy McCoy

Participant limit: 15 – Registration required; [click here](#).

Meeting place: Meet near the restroom across from the Ediz Hook boat launch at 8:00 a.m.

Cost: Free

Liability Form: See message from Field Trip Chair.

Features: This trip will check out resident and migrant birds close to home. I love seeing who is present at the beach and along the waterfront. Please join me as I struggle with the puzzle that is fall and winter plumage. I use eBird to help narrow down the species found in an area.

Common birds found here in October: Shorebirds such as Black-bellied Plover and Dunlin are likely. We will see gulls, hopefully Heermann's, my favorite, as well as Glaucous-winged and Short-billed, Brandt's Cormorants, and maybe Brown Pelicans. I love to see all the animals present in an area, so hopefully we will see the resident river otters and harbor seals, as well.

The tide will be coming in, hopefully pushing some shorebirds into our sights. We will drive back to Port Angeles harbor when we've seen our fill of the Hook. It will be colder and windier near the water than it is inland, so dress for the weather.

Contact information: Kathy McCoy (208) 921-1340. Text or call if you have questions!

Salt Creek County Park and Elwha River Mouth

Date and Time: Thursday, Oct. 19, 9 a.m. Limited to 20 participants – Register online at [Events Calendar](#).

Leader: Skip Perkins

Meeting Place: Salt Creek Recreational Area at 9am, 3506 Camp Hayden Road. After entering the park, follow park road to right and meet at first large pullout looking offshore. Carpooling is recommended.

Features: At Salt Creek: Oystercatchers, Harlequin Ducks, murrelets, auklets, eagles, songbirds, gulls, and other waterfowl. At low tide the tide pools can be interesting to explore.

At Elwha River mouth: Short hike to water. Gulls, loons, grebes, scoters, and other waterfowl.

ADA accessible restrooms available at both locations.

Further information if needed: Contact Skip Perkins at 715-580-0822 or email perkinsskip2@gmail.com.

Cost: Free

Liability Form: See message from Field Trip Chair.

Conservation Matters

by Joyce Volmut Conservation Co-Chair



Why Conserve Birds?

People have always admired birds; in fact, they inspire artists, music, and design. Birds are the driving force behind many conservation efforts, for example, the ban of DDT, hunting regulations as it applies to bird species and the destruction of wetlands. Why conserve? It is in our nature. Even in the 1800s when farmers noticed a decline in bluebirds, they built nest boxes to bring the declining population back. Simply put, people love birds.

Birds today face some of the hardest problems they have in quite some time and the problems are complex. Too many birds are vulnerable and threatened, like the Rufous Hummingbird and the Tufted Puffin, whose declining numbers have been documented.

Today the Conservation Committee needs your help. We seek solutions and we are asking you to take a leading role in conservation by joining forces with us. It's time for a new generation of committed conservationists and your voice can make a difference in birds' lives.

The conservation committee tackles local, statewide, or nationwide problems that affect birds. We examine the extent of the problem, draft letters that educate the public and policy makers on issues, and find solutions to conserve habitat

and eliminate threats. Examples of OPAS programs developed through the Conservation Committee include:

Western Bluebird Study: This program was Initiated as an education and data collection program to help understand the plight of cavity nesters such as the Western Bluebird. With permission from the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), this program monitors nest boxes in strategic places on DNR and private property where the Western Bluebird nests.

Project BirdSafe: This project started by collecting data on the number of bird window strikes in our area, eventually partnering with Peninsula College, where a number of window strikes were noticed. Assisted by Peninsula College Administration, students, teachers, and maintenance, the program is ongoing and receives grant dollars from National Audubon and matching funds from OPAS..

Project Swan Safe: When too many swans were killed or injured by striking powerlines, the conservation committee recommended partnering with Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) and the local PUD to find solutions to keep swans safe. A community wide "Go Fund Me" campaign was initiated to seek finances to bury electric lines in an area where Trumpeter Swans roost. Since the lines were buried in 2021 there have been no casualties at that site.

Purple Martin Project: Since 1997, OPAS partnered with the WDFW and USFWS to build nest boxes and to monitor the breeding of Purple Martins. These birds are a threatened species in WA, and rely on human-supplied nest cavities. We currently have 36 boxes installed during the breeding season at Three Crabs, Port Angeles, and Protection Island NWR. We coordinate with private land owners at Morse Creek and Diamond Point to monitor additional boxes.

Pigeon Guillemot (PIGU) Survey: Part of a Puget Sound survey, in cooperation with the Clallam County Marine Resources Committee, volunteers record the number of Pigeon Guillemots nesting in specific areas. This is important because PIGU are an indicator species for the health of the Salish Sea.

The OPAS Conservation Committee has been standing up for birds and their habitats for many years. We're proud of our bird conservation results. But **the need is great**. Please join us and make a difference for birds.

(Continued on next page)

Harlequin Happenings

Visit the [OPAS website](#) under the Conservation/take action tab to learn more of our activities and contact Bob Phreaner (phreaner@aol.com) or Joyce Volmut (joyce.volmut@gmail.com) to volunteer, or attend a Conservation Meeting.

Backyard Birding— October

by Rhonda Marks-Coats

Our Backyard Birding programs enjoyed new attendance records last season.

Thank you for your support! We look forward to our program's continued success with a revised, 10-part series starting on Saturday, October 7, 2023, and continuing on through the first Saturday of each month to July 2024.

As in the past, our programs will feature information on bird identification, biology, feeding, nesting, and habitats of the Olympic Peninsula. We develop our programs for folks new to birding and to our region as well as for those who wish to hone and refresh their bird knowledge and skills.



Bushtits
Photo by Robert Hutchison



Going forward, we will reprise and update several of our most popular classes from previous seasons, and we will introduce new topics by guest presenters. In the subsequent issue of this newsletter, we

will publish our planned schedule for the full 10-part series. Meanwhile, we are pleased to announce the topic and presenter for October:

“Winter Birds: Feeding & Watering—Methods & Equipment”

Presented by Christie Lassen, Co-owner of Wild Birds Unlimited, Gardiner, WA

Saturday, October 7, 2023, 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon,

Dungeness River Nature Center

Suggested donation: \$5

On Saturday, October 7, Backyard Birding will launch a new, 10-part series with the return of guest speaker, Christie Lassen. In her always popular seminar, Christie will discuss general bird feeding methods—including the latest on types of feeders and various foods formulated to attract specific birds,

while promoting thriving bird populations and discouraging unwelcome mammals! October is not too early to prepare for the special winter needs of the Anna's Hummingbird and other species that make the Pacific Northwest a yearlong home. Christie will highlight some selected products from Wild Birds Unlimited that will be available for purchase at the conclusion of her program.

Admission to each seminar is free. However, we suggest a donation of \$5.00 per person to support OPAS ongoing education programs. Please note that current Covid-19 safety precautions as recommended by Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe and Clallam County Public Health will be followed for the protection of attendees and volunteer staff.

Western Bluebird Study/Climate Watch

by Joyce Volmut, Conservation Co-Chair

The Climate Watch Survey ended June 15. The nesting sites for Western Bluebirds (WEBL) had both good and bad results. On May 3, Western Bluebirds were observed checking out nest boxes on Thompson Rd, but by May 26 they had vacated the site and House Wrens took over.

The fate of Western Bluebirds were also dire on Blake Ave. Property owners reported the pair returned in early April. They began nesting activity in May. By late May, property owners noticed an absence of parent birds. When the boxes were checked, six dead chicks were found inside.



Western Bluebird Fledglings
Photo by Tom Backe, property owner

Better results were found at other nesting sites. On River Rd, DNR – Western Bluebirds produced 2 broods with five fledglings. On Lois Lane, near the Nature Center, property owners reported three fledglings in late July. A successful brood of six fledglings was also reported near O'Brien Rd. Other Climate Watch Survey results: Red-breasted Nuthatch - 14, American Goldfinch - 87, Spotted Towhee- 36.

I want to thank all the Climate Watch volunteers, especially volunteers who have been with the program from the beginning.

Dungeness Data— Something to Crow About

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.

We all know crows, right? We see crows every day in the lowlands of the north Olympic Peninsula, walking on beaches, flying about



Close-up of American Crow Face
Photo by Bob Boekelheide

towns, and cawing on the rooftops. Their reputations range from noisy pests to cunning thieves to smart opportunists.

But do we really know crows?

As recently as

2020, birders still thought there were two species of crows in Clallam County – American Crow and Northwestern Crow. Remember the good old days, when we used to say that the crows walking around the schoolyards in Sequim and Port Angeles looked and sounded like American Crows, whereas the crows foraging in the intertidal at Neah Bay looked and sounded like Northwestern Crows? In 2020, that myth came crashing down. Based on genetic information, that year the American Ornithological Society lumped the two species, making the Northwestern Crow a subspecies of American Crow.

The lumping was based on scientific research and a paper entitled “Cryptic and Extensive Hybridization between Ancient Lineages of American Crows,” headed by David Slager. The research showed that American and Northwestern Crows have a “hybrid zone” stretching from southeast Alaska to southwest Washington, centered right here at the Strait of Juan de Fuca and southwestern B.C. In their study, crows at both Neah Bay and Victoria B.C. showed fairly even proportionality in both mitochondrial and nuclear DNA between Northwestern and American types, which means that our Olympic Peninsula crows

could not be assigned to one species or the other. Therefore, they are the same species.

The researchers speculated that the Northwestern-type crows split from generic American-type crows when ice sheets advanced during the Pleistocene epoch, within the last few hundred-thousand years. As the ice advanced, Northwestern-types moved into coastal ice-free refugia to the north. When the ice subsequently melted, the two species recombined. This likely happened several times, as continental and coastal mountain glaciers advanced and retreated. Genetically, the study demonstrated that the “hybrids” showed lots of back-crossing, indicating that their crossbreeding may have occurred over many generations, not just recently. Once again, they are the same species.

If you live in a town on the north Olympic Peninsula, it’s likely that you often see roving bands of crows in your neighborhoods. Depending on the time of year, flocks may be only a few crows, sometimes many more. Crows elsewhere sometimes form giant flocks of thousands of crows (aka “murders”), particularly at communal roost sites, although flocks on the north Olympic Peninsula rarely number more than a few hundred.

The all-time record crow count on eBird, the amazing bird app from Cornell University, occurred in southern Ohio in November 2001, estimated at 500,000 crows. Other communal roosts in the southern plains reportedly held one to two million crows, particularly where migrant flocks mixed with resident flocks. That’s a lot of “caws” for concern. The high count for western Washington was near the UW Bothell campus, where upwards of 20,000 crows may roost together outside the nesting season. The high eBird count for Clallam County is 673, seen by Sue Nattinger near Joyce in November, 2009. As you can see, Clallam crow flocks can’t compare in size with other flocks around North America.

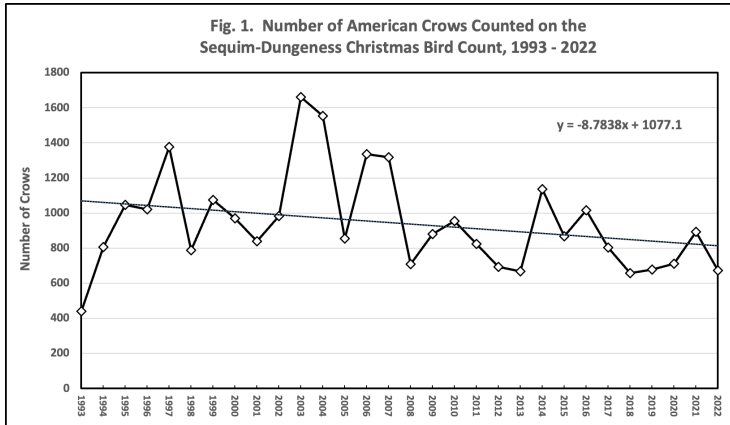
In actuality, the long-term counts of crows throughout western Washington seem to be declining. One measure is our Sequim-Dungeness Christmas Bird Count (SDCBC), occurring every year in mid-December (see Figure 1).

The SDCBC shows lots of variability between years, but the average crow count for the last 30 years has declined from just over 1000 crows in the 1990s to just over 800 crows in the last 10 years (Figure 1). Similar trends appear in eBird, which shows an average decline of about 21 percent in relative abundance of crows in the Sequim area between 2007 and 2021.

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Harlequin Happenings

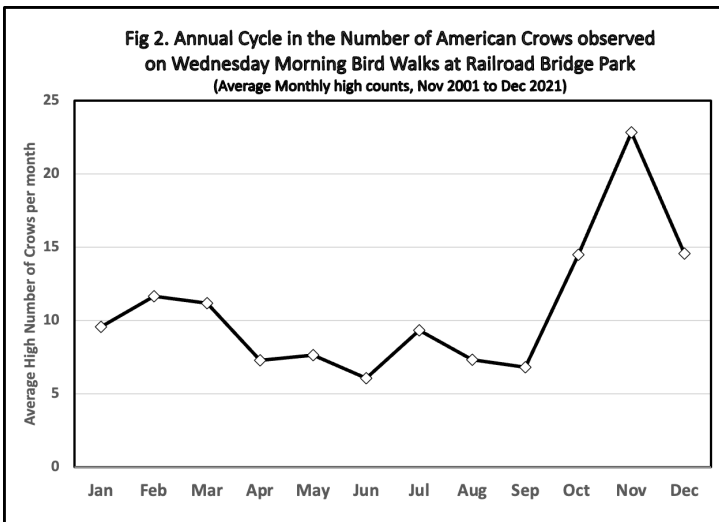
Since crows are considered very adaptable to humans, why are there fewer crows? One possibility is West Nile Virus, which has caused serious mortality in crows, especially in eastern North America.



Another possibility is Avian Influenza, which has spread widely particularly this year, although it seems to affect water birds and raptors more than passerines like crows. The spread of both these viruses is likely enhanced by warming climate and related changes in migratory and nesting patterns of wild birds.

Even though crows are present year-round on the north Olympic Peninsula, data from 20 years of weekly bird walks show that crow numbers in Railroad Bridge Park bump up in the fall, peaking in November (Figure 2). The data also show that fewer crows visited Railroad Bridge Park during the nesting season, from April to September.

Crows do not nest within RR Bridge Park, as far as we know, but there are usually several crow nests within a mile or two of the park. Like all corvids, crows are very social, forming structured flocks with a nucleus of older breeding adults. In some ways, crow flocks remind me of wolf packs, centered around older, more experienced individuals.



Crows often target humans and human foods, which perpetuates their reputation for thievery. We have a walnut tree in our yard, where our neighborhood crows tentatively start sampling walnuts about mid-August. The walnuts usually don't really ripen until September, so in August the first crows taste a walnut or two, then leave. Every few days they land in the tree, as if checking out the ripening crop. Once the walnuts are ripe, look out. Gangs of crows strip walnuts out of the tree and pick fallen walnuts off the ground, prying them apart with their bills or dropping them in the road to open them. Any suitable platform becomes a walnut-pounding zone, be it a telephone pole or neighborhood roof. Clumsy crows drop walnuts off the roofs into the gutters, to our great consternation. We laugh about it now, but one year my neighbor's gutter totally plugged up and spilled water on their porch during the first big rainstorm of the fall. They dismantled the gutter and found it was totally crammed full with walnuts. Sorry, neighbors!



*American Crow perched on baby buggy
Photo by Bob Boekelheide*

It turns out that some crow populations migrate, particularly those that nest in areas of Canada and the northern U.S. where winter conditions can be downright nasty. It is likely that nesting crows on the Olympic Peninsula do not migrate, but are instead resident year-round. In this regard, it would be most interesting to know how far our resident crows range during the year. Do they stay close to their nesting areas, or do they move around the peninsula? Might other crows migrate through the north Olympic Peninsula, possibly interacting with resident populations and increasing local numbers in fall? This seems unlikely, considering that crows do not have the propensity to fly over huge stretches of open water.

Research shows that during the nesting season many breeding pairs are joined by other crows that help by bringing food to

incubating females and chicks, and by chasing off predators. These “helpers” are usually offspring from previous years, but not always. Research with marked crows reveals that sometimes helpers are not related to breeding pairs, but they’re still tolerated around the nest. Since crows do not start nesting on their own until they are at least two-years-old and often older, the extra years with experienced breeders might provide critical training to prepare young birds for successful nesting later in life.

Crows usually build a big stick nest placed in either a conifer or a deciduous tree. Look for crow nests after the deciduous trees have lost their leaves in the fall; they can be difficult to find when the trees are still in leaf. Female crows do most of the nest building, weaving sticks in place to their satisfaction. They occasionally reuse nests, but most of the time they build new ones. Other species such as hawks, owls, sleeping raccoons, and squirrels often use abandoned crow nests.



Fledgling American Crow's Blue Eyes
Photo by Bob Boekelheide

Crows' typical clutch sizes averages four to five eggs, ranging from three to six eggs. The eggs usually have a blue or greenish background color covered with dark smudgy spots. The female does all the incubation, fed by the male and any helpers at the nest. The eggs typically hatch in 16 to 18 days. Crows then go through an extensive chick and fledgling period, not leaving the nest until about 30 to 35 days after hatching, then not leaving their nest tree for several more days after that. They remain dependent on their parents for food for several more weeks, begging raucously and persistently starting at the crack of dawn. I once made the mistake of camping below a crow's nest with several fledglings, which started their nasal “AAHH, AAHH, AAHH, AAHH...” non-stop begging about 4:30 in the morning. No more sleep for me. But the best thing about fledgling crows is their striking blue-eyes, which quickly turn brown during their first year.

It's not an easy life being a crow. Research with banded crows showed that more than half the chicks that made it to fledging died within their first year. Less than 10 percent of marked birds made it to five years old, and almost no adults lived beyond eight years. Despite this, the longevity records for banded crows are 15 to 17 years old. Very few crows ever make it to these ripe old ages.

When I first moved to Sequim in the 1990s, in late summer I noticed flocks of crows flying together at dusk into the foothills of the Olympics, apparently going to a roost site. Over a few evenings I stationed myself at various places, hoping to track where the crows ended up. The best I could do is follow them up the Dungeness River valley to an area near Slab Camp, at about 2500 ft. elevation. Unfortunately, I never found the exact roost site. Suffice it to say, they traveled several miles into the Olympic foothills to find a roost with the right conditions. Secretive little devils.

At the time I worked at Sequim High School, where football games occurred some Friday nights. One early Saturday morning, after a football game the night before, I happened to be at school right at dawn and found a big flock of a hundred or so crows already walking around the football field, foraging on food scraps littering the stands and field. My guess is these crows knew exactly when football games occurred and made it a point to arrive early the next morning for spilled food and tasty morsels.

Look deep into the eyes of wild crows. They have the true spark of life, totally observant and aware of their surroundings. Here is your homework assignment: Go watch a flock of crows this month and really observe how they behave and interact with one another and the rest of the world. Then think about the walnuts in my gutters.

*Many of the interesting facts about American Crows 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.*

Harlequin Happenings

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