

Idaho Magic Feathers[®]

Idaho's Birds and Beyond



A Cameron MultiMedia, LLC Publication © 2003 Kathleen Cameron, Author & Editor
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The Wood River CBC

Through the binoculars I was eye to eye with the small, black, beady orb. I could see snowflakes reflected in this eye. On my side of the optics I stood in the kitchen admiring the scarlet Northern Cardinal perched on the leafless, snow-covered branch of the quince bush outside the window. Further back in perspective I was deep in R.E.M., sleep-dreaming an Ohio winter scene. The vivid red and black plumage of my dreamed cardinal awakened me in that manner which allows for detailed recall. As I reviewed the dream, I began to revisit memories of the 1999 Christmas Bird Count (CBC) which began at 4:30 a. m. when I met my team members at the Wilderness Center in Wilmot. We began our count with owls and moved on to passerines, waterfowl, and raptors over the course of our day as we diligently scoured our assigned square miles. The highlight of that day for me was seeing my first Pileated Woodpecker before dusk ended our adventure.

It was not long until I was remembering my experiences on this year's Wood River CBC that took place on January 3rd. We met in Picabo, Idaho, at 7:30 a.m. to plot our team courses. Brian Sturges organized the Wood River count and has done so for many years. He gave our team our assignment, and we agreed to meet to tally our counts at 4:30 that afternoon. Dave Spaulding, Poo Wright-Pulliam, and I became teammates, and Brian and Kent Fothergill made up the other team. This was a smaller than usual turnout for the CBC. Many of the Wood River stalwart birders were out of town, and recent weather

conditions had been intimidating. It had only been a day since three feet of snow had been dumped on the valley in a forty-eight hour period. We



Dave Spaulding, Poo Wright-Pulliam and Kathleen Cameron snowshoeing at Silver Creek on the CBC. Photo courtesy of Poo Wright-Pulliam. Copyright 2004.

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**Thank you for your interest and appreciation of
the birds!**

had no clear idea how much of our back road assigned territory we were actually going to be able to access. The main roads, however, had been plowed, it was not windy, and the breaking dawn revealed a sunny day. A bitter-cold day, it was 6 degrees as we headed out to begin our count.

In a matter of moments nature began to reveal herself in all of her glory and raw reality. Nearing Silver Creek north of Picabo we saw across the snow near the bank of the creek what appeared to me to be two coyotes frolicking. We were, however, soon shocked to see that a coyote was, in fact, nipping at the nose of a yearling deer that it had chased into the frigid water. The coyote was spooked by us and ran off while the poor deer struggled to get a hoof grip on the ice to get out of the water. It was in a desperate situation. Panic and frost veiled its face, as frosted breath exploded from its nostrils. We knew that it was

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likely to succumb in a matter of moments without human intervention. Even with such assistance we knew that its chances of surviving this ordeal were slim. We found help from several ranchers who had been having coffee in Picabo. They arrived with lassos and managed to haul the deer out of the icy water, but it had been there too long and soon died. Nature's immediate disclosure of how brutal deep winter can be on wildlife was sobering. It was a long while before the silent atmosphere lifted and we could resume our count.

Traveling along the creek we stopped periodically to scan floating waterfowl. Goldeneye wings whistled overhead through the chilled morning air, V's of geese appeared on the horizon, Belted Kingfishers, Northern Shrikes, and Bald Eagles perched in nearby trees with keen eyes on the water and riparian habitat. Along the road, an American Kestrel posed for snapshots while roosted atop a fence pole. Nine Chukars strolled out the door of a barn to participate in the census. A spectacular Ring-necked Pheasant assumed a regal stance amidst strands of tall golden grass; shimmering snow diamonds perfectly accented the scene. In a grove of trees we found two great horned owls, and across the adjacent field Gray Partridges scratched for seeds at the base of sagebrush on the hillside. The day was unfolding in grand style, and we were finding an amazing number of species given that the weather had been so harsh. Perhaps it was due to this being the first full day with no snow for the last week.

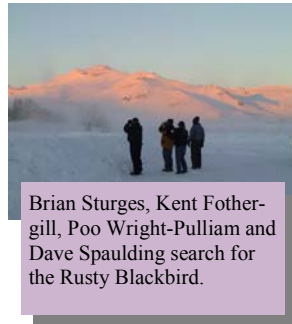
At the Silver Creek Preserve we snow-shoed up a hill to look down into Sullivan pond. While we climbed, various species of waterfowl caught our attention as they flew over the creek below. We saw Trumpeter Swans, Northern Pintails, both species of Goldeneye, Canada Geese, 88 Mallards, 20 Common Mergansers, and 109 American Wigeons. From this vantage point we could easily scan the stands of cottonwoods across the preserve for raptors. It was not long until we found four Bald Eagles--two mature and two immature birds. One of the young was nearly 60% white. We added these four to our list, which made a total of 14 for the day. As we departed the preserve, a flock of 11 Snow Geese flew eastward, appearing like winged ghosts above the trees.

Dave shared with me an experience that he and Poo had while on the 2002 CBC. They had witnessed a Prairie Falcon make a long, low dive and hit a Magpie twice before taking it down.

Dave said that this was an amazing sight. Then just as the falcon began to eat the bird, it quit and flew off. All the witnesses thought this was strange until they saw the Bald Eagle coming in for a landing. The eagle had just begun to eat the Magpie when suddenly it flew off with it in its talons; a coyote was approaching at this point! Dave said that it was an interesting chain of events that could only have been even more intriguing if the coyote had ended up with the Magpie.



Brian adds the Virginia Rail to the list. Dave and Poo continue to watch for the blackbird.



Brian Sturges, Kent Fothergill, Poo Wright-Pulliam and Dave Spaulding search for the Rusty Blackbird.

At the Hayspur Fish Hatchery a Northern Harrier glided silently through the rising, late afternoon mist which steamed off the water. Song Sparrows, a Common Snipe, and several Kingfishers foraged, unmindful of our presence. While looking at the snipe, we became aware of a bird pecking about on the algae-covered surface. To our utter astonishment, it was a female Rusty Blackbird! A rare bird! Rare because Rusty Blackbirds are winter residents of the eastern U.S. and are hardly ever seen in Idaho during any time of the year. Finding this unusual bird was making a wonderful day of birding just that much more exciting! Interestingly, this bird was only about twelve feet from where my team found a Varied Thrush the previous January during the CBC. Varied Thrush can be found in the northernmost reaches of Idaho during the summer months, and, as a general rule, do not winter in any part of the state. Given these back to back rare bird finds at Hayspur, I have decided that this is a lucky spot for the CBC!



Great Horned Owl at sunset at the Hayspur Fish Hatchery.

Photo K. Cameron. Copyright 2004.

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We raced back to Picabo to meet Brian and Kent and told them about the Rusty Blackbird. We promptly all returned to the hatchery to see if we could find the bird again since it would be a life list bird for Kent and an Idaho list bird for Brian. By this time the sun was very low and was casting long shadows as it set behind a bank of fog in the west. Pink and golden light glowed through the trees, snow crunched under our feet as we all diligently searched for the blackbird. We did not find her again that day, but both Brian and Kent have found her since then. We did add two more species to our count when a Virginia Rail was spotted and an American Dipper was heard.

At the end of the day, Poo, Dave, and I had documented 40 species and had counted 1,012 individual birds. The three of us were serenely exhausted as we drove home. We thought that the day just could not have been any better, but nature was not finished seizing our senses. A huge fireball meteor streaked across the southeastern sky with an extensive diffusion of teal, red, yellow, and violet hues trailing behind it. It was a breathtaking vision in the clear, Venus-lit sky!

What an adventure we had that day! Next year when it is time to sign up for the 105th CBC, my suggestion is to give it a try! You may find it to be the stuff that dreams are made of...



A dreamlike scene unfolds as the sun sets at the hatchery. Photo K. Cameron. Copyright 2004.

Correction:

In the December issue of *IMF* I was having so much fun with the Photoshop image of the Hoopoe that I failed to give an accurate depiction of the head plumage. The feathers on the top of the head should have been tipped in white and black like the pattern on the tail.

EXCITING RARITIES VISIT IDAHO !

The winter birding season has been extremely interesting, and there are still two months to go! So far four rare birds have been found, and birders from all over Idaho and as far away as Portland, Oregon, have been traveling to see these birds.

So what's causing all the fuss? A Great Black-backed Gull, a Brambling, a Rusty Blackbird, and a Northern Hawk Owl. Why are these four birds of interest and causing such excitement? Well, the Great Black-backed Gull is rarely seen much past the eastern seaboard and is an Idaho first record! The Brambling is a Eurasian species with only a smattering of sightings in North America. Rusty Blackbirds winter east of the Mississippi and breed in Alaska and Canada, and Northern Hawk Owls are year round residents of the boreal forests of Alaska and Canada. There have been sightings of the N. Hawk Owl in Idaho, sixteen to be exact, but this one is the furthest south ever reported here.

Cliff and Lisa Weisse found the rare gull on December 12, 2003. Cliff has a particular fascination with gulls, and, in this regard, he is a rare bird. Idaho is not the best place to practice such a fascination, but Cliff does very well for being a non-coastal resident. Lisa has also been lucky, having found a Ross's gull several years ago. The immature Great Black-backed Gull that this diligent duo found was at the Ada County dump near Boise.



Cliff and Lisa's first year Great Black-backed Gull flies over the Ada County dump.

Digital Photo by Cliff Weisse. Copyright 2003.

On January 3, 2004, my Christmas Bird Count team found a female Rusty Blackbird at the Hayspur Fish Hatchery, which is just west of Picabo, Idaho, on route 20. We had a good, long look at this bird and took several photographs for confirmation. There have been at least a half dozen reports of Rusty Blackbirds in Idaho over the years, but as far I know, this was a Blaine County record. Since January 3rd, many birders have stopped at the hatchery in hopes of adding this bird to their life lists. For the most part, people have found it. I

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have been lucky enough to have see it four times since the 3rd.



Female Rusty Blackbird
Digitized 35mm, 300mm.
Image magnified. K. Cameron.

Next up on the rarity list was a Brambling found in Kuna, Idaho, on January 5th at Neva Black's house. This Eurasian bird has been seen at least once before in Idaho. A quick check in any North American field guide will illustrate how infrequently this bird is found in North America. Birders descended on Neva's yard at her invitation. On December 10th I was fortunate to get several quick views of the bird, totally about five minutes. Its bright orange breast and black wing bar stood out dramatically amidst the House Finches and Sparrows also at the feeder. What a lovely bird!



Brambling; non-breeding plumage. Kuna, Idaho, January 10, 2004.
Extracted Video Frame. K. Cameron.

On the morning of December 7th my friend Poo called to tell me that she and her husband Dan were on Elkhorn Road in Sun Valley about 17 miles north of my home. She was very excited and started describing an owl that she had spied while they were driving to the post office. She did not have her binoculars, field guide, or camera with her. I opened my *Sibley Guide to Birds*, and as she described the owl, I agreed that this was a species that most likely would not usually be seen in Idaho. Neither of us was certain what she was seeing, so I agreed to get there as quickly as possible with binoculars, books, spotting scope, and cameras. Poo gave me directions, and I rushed to pull my things together to head north.

Article References:

The Sibley Guide to Birds, David Allen Sibley, National Audubon Society, pg. 226, 524, 283, 514

When I arrived in the area, I could not find Poo and Dan but did find the owl. A quick look through the binoculars at its yellow bill and eyes, its chocolate brown wings with white spots, finely barred belly, and the black, white and grey pattern on its head, and I knew it was a Northern



N. Hawk Owl (*Surnia ulula*) This shot was taken about 10 minutes after finding the owl. It was snowing at the time. 35mm. K. Cameron. Copyright 2004.

Hawk Owl! I was jumping for joy as Poo came around the corner, back from home with optics and books. As I gave her the thumbs up and yelled, "It's a Northern Hawk Owl!" she was yelling, "It's a Northern Hawk Owl, isn't it!" Now we were both jumping for joy! What a find! We could not contain our excitement! Having no way of knowing how long the owl would be around, we got pictures and video and then raced off to call the rare bird hotline and post our find on the internet. Almost instantly calls for directions to the bird started coming in. Four newspaper articles have been written at this point about the owl, and Poo and I are enjoying the fact that so many people have come to see this beautiful bird. The owl continues to be seen in the Elkhorn Village area, and it appears to be not the least bit disturbed by its celebrity.

Meanwhile there is a Whooper Swan (*Cygnus cygnus*), a Eurasian species rarely seen in western North America, in Yellowstone National Park in Montana. The swan has been spotted in Biscuit Basin, which is only ten miles from the Idaho border. Perhaps it will make the short flight to Idaho and bring our rare bird count to five!



Elkhorn's N. Hawk Owl stretches its wing.

Extracted Video Frame. K. Cameron. Copyright 2004.