

Conservation on the Wings of the **Mountain Bird Festival**

At the southern end of the Rogue River Valley, where the ancient Siskiyou Mountains butt up against the younger and more jagged Cascades and their line of active volcanoes, there lies the small and inviting town of Ashland, Oregon. It is here that a small group of dedicated individuals are busy organizing the second annual Mountain Bird Festival—an event hosted in May 2015 by Klamath Bird Observatory that proudly places conservation front and center.

The larger region of southern Oregon and northern California is sometimes referred to as the mythical state of Jefferson in homage to past secessionist movements to create a fifty-first state. This remote region is an attractive setting for a birding festival for many reasons. The natural beauty of the area can be overwhelming. To the east of Ashland, the Cascades rise up from the valley floor at a steady pace; their lower foothills are

clothed in grasslands and oak woodlands that eventually give way to conifer forests studded with mountain meadows and natural lakes. In the mornings, dramatic bands of clouds reveal the scale of the landscape. In the late afternoons, a popular activity is to sit outside Ashland's Caldera Brewery and watch the red sunlight slide up the Cascade range, lingering last on Grizzly Peak.

Towering above Ashland to the west are the steep-sided and heavily forested Siskiyou, with their granite heart. From nearly any vantage point in these mountains, one can admire a series of ridgelines leading to the horizon. The possibilities for exploration seem endless. For visiting and local birders, the mountain birds offer the most compelling reason to venture outside.

Many mountain birds live and breed in habitats less than a half hour drive from downtown Ashland. They range from alpha predators, like the Great Gray Owl

View of the southern Rogue Valley from a lookout in Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument, located 10 miles southeast of Ashland. Photo © Brandon Breen



**Brandon
Breen**

Ashland, Oregon
brandonmbreen@hotmail.com

**Harry
Fuller**

Ashland, Oregon
atowhee@gmail.com

**John
Alexander**

Ashland, Oregon
jda@klamathbird.org

Mountain Bird Festival



Birders who are serious about fun and conservation. Photo © Brandon Breen



Adult male Anna's Hummingbird.
Photo © Peter J. Thiemann

and Northern Goshawk, to the diminutive Chestnut-backed Chickadee and Pygmy Nuthatch. The area is rich in woodpeckers, including Acorn and Lewis's, Black-backed and White-headed, as well as Red-breasted and Williamson's Sapsuckers. Mountain Quail call from the steepest slopes, and Western Tanagers provide sparks of bright color against the dark green of the conifers they love.

American Dippers breed in town along the creek in Lithia Park. The nearby meadows and brushy mountain slopes harbor

The Rogue River was one of the original eight rivers included in the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968. Photo © Theresa Breen

Vesper Sparrow, Lazuli Bunting, MacGillivray's Warbler, Green-tailed Towhee, and Mountain Bluebird. Above 4,000 feet, the Douglas-fir forests shelter Hermit Warbler, Cassin's Vireo, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Dusky Flycatcher, and Gray Jay.

Klamath Bird Observatory's Mountain Bird Festival celebrates these and other birds while raising funds and awareness for their continued survival. This year's festival will be held from May 29th to May 31st, with help from partner organizations including the City of Ashland, the Ashland Chamber of Commerce, and Science-Works Hands-On Museum. The festival emphasizes the important roles of citizens and science in elevating bird conserva-



Great Gray Owl is featured on the Mountain Bird Festival logo and was seen on multiple field trips during the 2014 festival. Photo © Peter J. Thiemann

tion; in fact, every festival attendee acts as a significant conservation steward by (1) donating to the National Wildlife Refuge System, (2) donating to Klamath Bird Observatory's conservation science programs, and (3) contributing field trip bird sightings to the eBird database through the regional portal, eBird Northwest.

First, each festival-goer supports conservation by purchasing a Federal Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation [Duck] Stamp through their registration payment.



Staff from Klamath Bird Observatory get out of the office for a monthly birding outing, in this case to an eBird hotspot and Mountain Bird Festival field trip destination: Emigrant Lake. Photo © Karen Hussey

The Federal Duck Stamp Program is considered one of the most successful conservation programs of all time; proceeds from stamp sales are used to purchase or lease strategic wetland habitat for protection within the National Wildlife Refuge System. More than 6 million acres of habitat have been preserved through this program over the last 80 years.

The breeding birds of national wildlife refuges near Ashland will be among the attractions of the 2015 Mountain Bird Festival. A few field trips will cross the north-south running Cascades to visit the Upper and Lower Klamath National Wildlife Refuges in the world-renowned Klamath Basin. There, visitors will attempt to glimpse the rushing courtship displays of Clark's and Western grebes while admiring other waterfowl and raptors. The Upper Refuge has received support from Duck Stamp funds, whereas the Lower Refuge predates the stamp program,



Adult male Evening Grosbeak. Photo © Dan Elster

having been established in 1908 by President Theodore Roosevelt as the U.S.'s first migratory waterfowl refuge.

Second, Mountain Bird Festival attendees advance bird conservation by purchasing through registration a new and attractive Mountain Bird Conservation Science Stamp, modeled after the Duck Stamp and designed by northern California art-



Adult Bald Eagle. Photo © George Peterson

Mountain Bird Festival



Sandhill Cranes breed east of Ashland in the Cascade Range. Photo © Peter J. Thiemann

ist Gary Bloomfield. Proceeds from these sales support Klamath Bird Observatory's science and education programs. The observatory oversees one of the densest networks of long-term bird-monitoring stations in the world and delivers environmental data and expertise to regional land managers who produce on-the-ground results that benefit birds.

Third, the Mountain Bird Festival elevates conservation by ensuring all bird sightings made during its field trips will be entered into eBird, a real-time, online checklist program created by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and National Audubon Society. eBird is one of the fastest-growing biological databases in the world. The bird abundance and distribution data entered into eBird contribute to an unprecedented understanding of the dynamic health of the natural world and allow scientists to better identify conservation priorities.

The Mountain Bird Festival is notable for a few reasons beyond its conservation significance. The festival is a true community event that draws upon and showcases the talent and products of the region, including birding guides, musicians, artists, and local foods and beverages. Visitors to Ashland will soon learn that the town is home to the nine-month-long Oregon Shakespeare Festival, which runs three professional theatres and several plays through its lengthy sea-

son. Local wineries, brewpubs, and restaurants cater to a sophisticated clientele. Also, hiking, kayaking, river rafting, rock climbing, and other mountain-based sports are widely enjoyed by visitors and locals alike. Importantly, the festival is demonstrating that birding means business: In 2014, attendees spent an estimated \$70,000 on lodging, travel, food, entertainment, and other incidentals during their festival visit, offering economic benefits for the local communities in and around Ashland.

The Mountain Bird Festival is a fun and ambitious event aimed at further mobilizing birdwatchers, who collectively possess the power to overturn decades-long population declines in many species. Conservation-minded birdwatchers are gathering in late May in southern Oregon to enjoy—and protect—nature's full avian palette, from black and white to gray, purple, lazuli, blue, yellow, golden, orange, ruby, red, green, and olive.

The goal is nothing short of success with flying colors. 🦅



Wrentit. Photo © Jim Livaudais



Adult male Lazuli Bunting. Photo © Jim Livaudais

Prairie Falcon. Photo © Peter J. Thiemann