

Volume 52 Issue 1

**January/
February 2023**



Calliope Crier

Newsletter of the Yakima Valley Audubon Society

The Yakima Valley Audubon Society is people dedicated to the enjoyment and preservation of the natural world. Through birding, education, and conservation activities in our community, we raise awareness and promote the cause of global environmental protection.

YVAS January Program

Madagascar: Biodiversity in Peril

Speaker - Eric Heisey

Thursday, January 26th at the Yakima Area Arboretum*
Doors open at 6:30, and program begins at 7:00 pm.

Also streaming on Zoom. Online meeting opens at 6:45 pm.



Photo Pitta-like Ground Roller. Photo by Eric Heisey.

Madagascar may host one of the most unique biological communities on this planet. The country is widely revered amongst biologists for its vast array of endemic species; roughly 90% of Malagasy flora and fauna are found nowhere else on this planet. Perhaps the best known of these are Madagascar's lemurs. Incredibly varied landscapes paired with

lots of evolutionary time have resulted in a fantastical assortment of life forms. Truly, this country is a biological gem.

When I first learned of this magical place as a toddler, I remember picturing vast swaths of virgin forest dripping with life as the haunting sounds of lemurs echoed through the moss-laden trees. It took me one car ride in Madagascar to realize how misguided this vision was. In fact, over 90% of Madagascar's forests have been completely stripped of trees since humans first arrived 2,400 years ago. Today, forests remain intact only where they have been nationally protected or where mountains are so steep that the clearing of the forest is impossible or impractical.



Photo Eric Heisey with a pair of wood ducks. Photo by Eric Heisey.

** We request all to wear masks inside the Arboretum for everyone's protection.*

Countless species native to Madagascar have already been wiped from the face of this earth, with more set to follow if human activities do not relent. Given the immense magnitude of endemism on the world's fourth largest island, Madagascar must be at the forefront of the world's conservation efforts.

I spent four months working in Madagascar as a research assistant and hope that I can share some of the perspective I gained in my time there. Madagascar is considered one of the five poorest countries in the world. Factors of wealth inequality, hunger, disease, and poverty which we in the United States cannot conceive of compounds the dire conservation issues facing Madagascar, and these issues are echoed across the world. How are these issues affecting Madagascar and the rest of the planet? And what can we do to help?

I hope that this talk will inspire an interest in the tropical parts of the world through an introduction to some of the incredible fauna that call Madagascar home, while also providing an important perspective that we are shielded from in this country. I would be delighted if you'd join me for this presentation!

About Eric Heisey: After growing up in the Yakima Valley, enthralled with our native avifauna, Eric attended university at Western Washington University for two years before transferring to the University of Guelph in Ontario, Canada to finish his degree. While at Guelph, Eric got his feet wet in the realm of research, conducting an honors thesis on how environmental and demographic factors affect the timing of breeding of Savannah Sparrows (published in *Ecology*). Since graduating, Eric has been pursuing odd jobs in various locales. In Madagascar, Eric spent four months working as a research assistant studying frog responses to microclimatic stressors associated with rising temperatures as a result of a changing climate and rampant deforestation. Over the past two years he has also worked with Greater Sage-Grouse in southeastern Oregon, as a backpacking guide in Yosemite National Park, as a teaching assistant for a university field course in the Amazon rainforest of eastern Peru, and is currently the regional editor for Washington for the journal *North American Birds*. He has diversified in his interests over the past few years, branching out from birds and becoming interested in a wider variety of flora and fauna, though he remains an avid and active birder wherever he may be.

Where to View YVAS Zoom Programs

Event link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/85751241932?pwd=K0lseGlvbng4WGikN3NaeEdaL2VTQT09>

iPhone one-tap : US: +12532158782 **Telephone:** +1 253 215 8782 **Webinar ID:** 844 2557 6656

To view previous programs that have been recorded, please see our website at www.yakimaudubon.org .

Message from Your Board

We are all enjoying the break in winter weather, and a brisk walk along the Greenway will show you that our birds are enjoying it, too! Many species reside here over the winter, eating seeds, insects, and, of course, food at our feeders, so don't let cold weather keep you indoors. The 2022 YVAS Christmas Bird Counts on December 17th and 31st each documented over 80 species! Your Audubon Society has been busy, too, and I would like to share with you some of what's happening this year. Your membership is helping support all of this and, via grants, also supporting the study of Clark's Nutcracker and Golden-crowned Sparrow populations in Yakima County.

- The Conservation Committee, headed by Stan Isley, has been participating the last few years in the evaluation of solar farm projects in our region. Although important for our nation's move towards alternative energy sources, their impacts to the local habitat are not insignificant. Properly locating these installations to mitigate impacts to wildlife and native plants is essential. Stan is a member of the Least-Conflict Solar Siting project panel. This group, organized by WSU, is studying the geology and environments in our state to identify potential solar farm locations which will have the least negative impact on wildlife and our environment. Counties, municipalities, and developers will now have criteria to help select the most appropriate and least impactful locations for the farms. There are more than 30 solar farms in the development phase for our region, so this work is current and vitally important.
- The Vredenburg Bluebird Trail has been supported by YVAS for more than 50 years! Under the current leadership of Karen Zook, it is continuing to grow despite destruction of habitat and nest boxes by wildfire in recent years. Karen has worked with her committed team to replace fire-damaged and old boxes, and the Bluebird team continues to expand and monitor our Mountain and Western Bluebird populations.
- Andy Stepniewski has put together some outstanding programs for this year. In January, YVAS member Eric Heisey will be talking about his field work in Madagascar. We are having in-person programs again at the Arboretum, while continuing to have the convenience of streaming and recording them via Zoom. We hope to see you again this year!
- Our Education Committee, headed by Ellen Stepniewski, is working with the Arboretum to again offer one of our popular classes. More to come this Spring!
- Scott Downes, our past President, is now Field Trip chair. He held a planning session on January 3rd, and we now have a full year of field trips to fit different schedules and abilities around our Valley and beyond! Look for regular updates in the Calliope Crier.
- With the guidance of our Communications chair, Anita Osterhaug, we are in the process of bringing you a new YVAS website. Needed information will be more accessible to you and we will be able to keep content more current. The website should launch later this spring.
- The Toppenish Wildlife Refuge is open after more than two years of Covid closure. During the closure, a new native plant garden just off the lookout parking lot was planted and it is now just full of wildflowers and native bees. Our YVAS Refuge Volunteer, Kerry Turley, is frequently there on weekends to give you some birding tips. If you haven't visited this wonderful wetland, plan a visit this year. Check for Refuge hours on their website.
- Joy McKinney continues to manage membership, Deborah Severtson-Coffin is Board Secretary, Rich Mathieu is Treasurer, and Bill Drenguis and Ken Tolonen are Board Directors. You may not hear much about what all these folks are doing in Audubon, but they and their work are essential to keep our organization running. Thank you all!

And finally, a few of our devoted, long time Board members have retired over the last couple of years after decades of committed service to Audubon. They are Richard Repp (Bluebird Trail), Denny Granstrand (Newsletter, Yakima Christmas Bird Count) and Dan Kinney (Fundraising). We can't thank them enough for the important work they have done over the years in service to our organization. This does present a challenge to YVAS, though: we need new Board members! There will be more next month on specific positions that are open. We hope you might be interested in joining the team or working on one of the Committees above. There is so much opportunity to make a difference!

Hope to see you this year, and happy birding!

—Sarah Shippen,
YVAS President

Events Calendar

Thursday, January 26th, 7 pm (Yakima Arboretum and Zoom)	YVAS January Program <i>Madagascar: Biodiversity in Peril</i> with speaker Eric Heisey.
Saturday, February 4th 7:30 am to 4 pm	McNary National Wildlife Refuge Field Trip. Contact Bill Drenguis at bdrenguis@gmail.com to sign up. (See article for more details.)
Saturday, February 11th 8 am to noon	Toppenish National Wildlife Refuge Field Trip. Contact Andy Stepniewski at steppie@nwinfo.net to sign up. (See article for more details.)
Friday, February 17th	February <i>Calliope Crier</i> deadline (send articles, questions to newsletter@yakimaaudubon.org)
Friday, February 17th through Monday, February 20th	Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC). Join in this great event as a citizen scientist! Find out more at www.birdcount.org .
Thursday, February 23rd, 7 pm Yakima Arboretum and Zoom	YVAS February Program <i>My Big Woodpecker Year 2: The Rest of the Story</i> with speaker Denny Grandstrand. Last year Denny spoke about his project to photograph all the North American woodpeckers, but only had time for some of them. This year, he will be speaking about and showing photos of the rest of them.
Saturday, March 11th. 8–10 am	Second Saturday Birdwalk. Bird walk at the Popoff Trail in Yakima. Leaders: Sarah Shippen and Gene Miliczky. More details to come.
Saturday, April 29th Half-day trip	Yakima Training Center Field Trip. Trip requires early sign-up process in order to get permission to visit the Training Center. Contact Scott Downes at downess@charter.net to sign up. (See article for more details.)

Membership – Joy McKinney

Welcome New Member!

Gean and Phil Dindia, Yakima

Thank You for Renewing Your Membership

Scott Downes, Stan and Lori Isley, Joyce Lucas, Steve Moore and Janet Demorest, Marjorie Peters, Carol Roth, Mary Lou Rozdilsky, Ellen and Andy Stepniewski, Robert and Leslie Wahl

Field Trips – *Scott Downes*

McNary National Wildlife Refuge

Saturday, February 4th, 7:30 am – 4 pm

It is time for a field trip! Typically, this time of year sees a buildup of waterfowl waiting to migrate further north. One of the best places to see this is at McNary Wildlife Refuge, just east of the Tri-Cities. The Refuge has recently added some walking trails to give easy access to the big lake and several ponds. The emphasis is on ducks, geese, swans, and herons.

We leave Yakima at 7:30 am on Saturday 2/4. (Hunting season will be over by then.) We should be back before 4 pm. PLEASE contact Bill Drenguis, your tour leader, to sign up and find out where you will be leaving from. He will be scouting the area ahead of time and, in the unlikely event of bad conditions (ice or heavy fog), he will contact you with any changes.

What to bring: Bring binoculars, cameras, and scopes to share plus lunch, snacks, and fluids. Dress warmly and be prepared for changing weather.

Leader: Bill Drenguis

To sign up and for meeting location and other details, contact Bill, bdrenguis@gmail.com or call or text to (509) 731-8632.

Toppenish National Wildlife Refuge

Saturday, February 11th, 8:00 am – noon

The winter thaw should be starting, so time to get out in the field!! Toppenish Refuge is a great place to seek out vanguards of the big spring waterfowl migration that pours through the region. Lots of wintering raptors should still be in the area, as well as flocks of sparrows and other birds. Join us for this half-day trip to the Lower Valley.

What to bring: Dress for changing weather. Bring snacks, fluids, warm clothes.

Leaders: Andy and Ellen Stepniewski

To sign up and for meeting location and other details, contact Andy at steppie@nwinfo.net.

Yakima Training Center

Saturday, April 29th, half-day trip

Scott Downes will lead a group of people to join a YTC biologist for a morning visit on the Training Center. We will look for shrubsteppe songbirds such as Sage thrasher, Sagebrush sparrow and Loggerhead shrike. Burrowing owls are also possible. Scopes will be on hand if you don't have one yourself. Meeting time will be announced to participants a couple weeks beforehand, but we will meet early morning and will conclude before lunch. Expect to dress in warm clothes as it can be chilly in the morning.

For this trip, participants will need to send driver's license or passport information and their date of birth. You need to provide that information to Scott, downess@charter.net, by March 15th so that the YTC can prescreen us. If you are not a US citizen, please note that in your sign-up info and get Scott your information sooner, as there is extra screening time for non-citizens and passport information will be required.

Carpooling will be required to minimize the number of vehicles entering the Training Center. If you plan on driving, make sure your vehicle has good tires and bring insurance information and proof of registration for your vehicle.

What to bring: Bring binoculars, cameras, and scopes to share plus snacks and fluids. Dress in warm clothes as it can be chilly in the morning.

Leader: Scott Downes

To sign up and for meeting location and other details, contact Scott, downess@charter.net by or before March 15th.

Join the Great Backyard Bird Count!

Join in the great conservation work of citizen science! You may count birds for as little as 15 minutes anywhere in the world during the four days of the Great Backyard Bird Count, Feb 17th thru 20th. You may visit as many locations as you wish during any or all four days of the count. Don't let our feathered friends at your very own favorite spot go uncounted! If you use eBird, all eBird lists you submit during the count period are automatically entered into the GBBC database. For details, visit www.birdcount.org.

Christmas Bird Count (CBC) 2022 Reports

Toppenish Bird Count, December 17th, 2022

This year's Toppenish Christmas Bird Count was the third of the COVID-19 era, and at last things fell back to some semblance of normalcy. For the first time since the start of the pandemic we were able to host a pre-count breakfast and post-count dinner again! We needed this boost as the bird counting was not without its challenges. We battled icy temperatures, completely frozen bodies of water, and difficulties securing access from the Yakama Nation to count the Dry Creek route, which typically harbors a few unique species such as Canyon Wren and Bushtit. Our inability to cover this route combined with very little open water surely cost us a few bird species, but we had a great count all the same.

Twelve birders ventured into the cold on December 17th, 2022. We found a good diversity of waterfowl, despite so much frozen water, with twenty species of ducks recorded. However, our numbers were low, as we recorded an all-time low count of 484 Mallards (average is 3,760) and found only single-digit numbers of nine of those twenty species.



Photo Trumpeter swans were spotted on both of this year's Christmas bird counts! Photo by Eric Heisey.

Interestingly, there were several unusual waterbirds for the count, as we recorded Snow Goose (4th count record), Trumpeter Swan (5th), Canvasback (count week), Greater Scaup, Horned Grebe (CW, 3rd occurrence), two Great Egrets (4th) and Double-crested Cormorant (CW). Other species of sub-annual occurrence found on this year's count were Rock Wren, California Scrub-Jay (found on two routes), Fox Sparrow, American Tree Sparrow, and Yellow-headed Blackbird.

Another trend this year was high numbers of raptors and ravens. We recorded high counts of Bald Eagle (21), Red-tailed Hawk (221) and Common Raven (335), while also observing more Rough-legged Hawks (12) than we had since 2000 and more Northern Harriers (66) than since 2014. Surely these counts must correspond with increased food availability, as the eagles and ravens were observed feasting on dead wild horses which had perished due to a combination of overpopulation-driven starvation and the prolonged period of cold with ample snow. The other raptor species must be capitalizing on rodents that must be absent elsewhere in eastern Washington this winter, as raptor numbers well below average have been noted in places like the Horse

Heaven Hills and Waterville Plateau where species like Rough-legged Hawk are typically common.

The CBC also recorded new high counts of Hooded Merganser (29; the third year in a row with a high count) and Spotted Towhee (31) this year. We noted the highest count of White-crowned Sparrows (1566) in 30 years, as well as huge numbers of House Finches (1628) for the second consecutive year. Species found in below average numbers were Black-capped Chickadee (3; ties low count), American Robin (221; 4th consecutive below-average tally), and American Goldfinch (50; the lowest count since 1983, the first year of the Toppenish CBC).

Overall, it was a good year for the Toppenish CBC despite the challenges. We found 81 species on this year's count and added three more count week species. We counted 14,752 individuals, 4,731 below our 39-year average, likely due to the low numbers of waterfowl. Of the 81 species observed on count day, 20 were seen only on one route.

Big thanks go out to all our fantastic route leaders and volunteer bird counters! We would not be able to hold this count without your help and support, and we at the Yakima Audubon Society are all tremendously grateful for your time and effort. Stay safe everyone and have a fantastic 2023!

Happy New Year to all!

—Eric Heisey,
Toppenish CBC Compiler

Yakima Bird Count, December 31st, 2022

The Yakima Christmas Bird Count was conducted by 19 observers worked in 10 teams, plus we had 2 feeder watchers. The morning started out with a thick fog layer, especially along the Yakima River and lowlands. The fog stayed throughout the day in some areas but cleared to partly sunny in others. Many of the ponds and lakes were frozen, but where there were spots of open water, and birds utilized these small spaces well, as noted by the waterfowl numbers

below. This was the first year after the start of COVID that the count returned to normal routine, with both a pre-count breakfast and a post-count dinner. It was great to be able to socialize with fellow counters again. The 21 observers found 90 species and 16,596 individuals. The 90 species is just slightly higher than recent years, but much higher than the all-time average of 74 species. The number of birds was higher than average by about 1,300 birds. There were some notable trends, such as excellent numbers and species of waterfowl.

The count recorded 21 species of waterfowl including high counts of Trumpeter Swan (16) and many diving ducks (Ring-necked Duck, Bufflehead, Common and Barrow's Goldeneye, Common Merganser). The count also recorded some unusual waterfowl: Greater White-fronted Goose (Yakima River at Selah), Snow Goose (Union Gap), and Eurasian Wigeon (Hwy. 12 near Yakima River). Other unusual waterbirds found on the count were Double-crested Cormorant and Horned Grebe.

Owls were represented by 3 species: Great Horned, Barred, and Northern Saw-whet. The cold seemed to have taken a toll on our over-wintering Anna's Hummingbird with only 5 birds recorded, our lowest total in the last five years and opposite of the increasing trend we had observed prior to the cold weather. California Scrub-Jays continued to increase, with an all-time high count of 88 birds. Thrushes and waxwings were well represented with all species at or above their averages and Townsend's Solitaire tied the all-time high count of 4 birds. Spotted Towhee also showed up in abundance with a high count of 97 birds. The count was rounded out with 2 Yellow-headed Blackbirds among the blackbird flock in Union Gap and an impressive 29 Myrtle subspecies of Yellow-rumped Warbler were noted along the Poppoff Trail in Union Gap, a locally common subspecies that is otherwise rare-to-absent in many other areas of Yakima.

Thank you to all of the counters who participated and your effort. I would like to end with a notable statistic

that summarizes the effort well. Combined, counters walked an estimated 40 miles. That equates to an average of 4 miles per team, with some teams walking 6–8 miles. Thank you to all for your efforts!

—Scott Downes
Yakima CBC Compiler

You can download the combined CBC bird count spreadsheet [here](#).

Conservation – Stan Isley

Solar Energy Updates

Washington Columbia Plateau Least-Conflict Solar Siting Project

In May 2019, Governor Inslee signed into law the Clean Energy Transformation Act (CETA), which commits Washington to a 100% clean electricity supply. CETA applies to all electric utilities serving customers in Washington, and it sets specific milestones for the utilities to reach the required clean electricity supply. The utilities must: 1) phase out coal-fired electricity from their Washington State portfolios by 2025 2) ensure their portfolios are greenhouse gas emissions neutral by 2030; and, 3) supply Washington customers with electricity that is 100% renewable or non-emitting, with no provision for offsets, by 2045. To help meet these state directives, large-scale solar developments are necessary.

The Washington State Legislature provided funding for fiscal year 2023 to complete a least-conflict solar siting project for eastern Washington’s Columbia Plateau, with the Washington State University Energy Program leading the project. This is a voluntary, collaborative, non-regulatory, landscape-scale process to identify areas within the Columbia Plateau where utility-scale solar projects might be sited that are less likely to generate significant conflict. The Least-Conflict Solar Siting Project seeks to identify where utility-scale solar can be developed in the Columbia Plateau region while also ensuring that important

habitat, productive farmlands and rangelands, and tribal treaty rights are protected. This project will issue a final report and high-resolution GIS maps by June 30, 2023.

I’m personally participating in the environmental conservation mapping subgroup, working to identify key core habitats for animal and bird species, pinpoint key habitat types, and identify animal migration/movement/connectivity corridors, all of which should be protected from solar development. Other subgroups are mapping farmlands and ranchlands, the location of utility transmission lines, military lands, land use, and tribal treaty rights and cultural resources. All participants are right in the heart of our efforts to map potential conflict areas, and therefore, to identify sites where solar development might occur in the Columbia Plateau region with the least conflicts.

The Least-Conflict Solar Project’s final report and maps will be a good foundation to guide responsible solar energy project development in the Columbia Plateau region of eastern Washington State. For more information about the Least-Conflict Solar Project, visit wsuenergy.databasin.org.

Proposed Solar Energy Developments in the Moxee and Blackrock Valleys

Four different proposed solar energy developments are located within Yakima County, east of the City of Yakima in the Moxee and Blackrock Valleys, and one additional proposed solar energy development is located immediately east of the Yakima County line in Benton County. Indeed, additional solar energy developments are also currently proposed in the larger Columbia Plateau region. There is a ‘solar rush’ going on here in eastern Washington, and unfortunately, these several solar energy projects are seeking permit approvals now, prior to the release of the Least-Conflict Solar Siting Project’s final report and GIS maps. Ideally, these solar energy developments would not be permitted until the developers and the permitting authorities had the opportunity to consider the important mapping information for the whole

Columbia Plateau that the Least-Conflict Solar Siting Project will provide on June 30, 2023. However, permitting authorities are required to move forward on the pending permit applications currently before them.

The Goose Prairie Solar Project east of Moxee received approval from the State of Washington in December 2021, after undergoing review of its permit application by the Washington State Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council (EFSEC). The developer is moving forward with this development.

The Black Rock Solar Project received Conditional Use Permit (CUP) approval from Yakima County in May 2022.

The proposed High Top and Ostrea Solar Projects are undergoing review by EFSEC, with the latest action being EFSEC's January 11, 2023, hearing on their Conditional Use Permit applications. These solar projects are now awaiting EFSEC's decision and recommendation to the governor.

Yakima County enacted a 6-month moratorium, on July 26, 2022, on approvals for solar energy projects in Yakima County. It appears this moratorium will not retroactively affect the four solar projects above that are already permitted or that were already in the permitting process on the moratorium's date of enactment.

The proposed Wautoma Solar Project sought approval from EFSEC under the state permitting process. EFSEC issued its Order dated November 15, 2022, finding that the Wautoma Solar Project is not consistent with and is not in compliance with Benton County Zoning Regulations, as amended in 2021. EFSEC will set a date for adjudication to determine whether EFSEC should recommend to the Governor that the state preempt the Benton County Zoning Regulations and approve the Wautoma Solar Project's application.

So, you can see that the solar energy boom is on here in central and eastern Washington State. I do hope the Least-Conflict Solar Project's final report and maps will be utilized as soon as those final products become available after June 30, 2023, to allow us all to ensure this solar 'gold rush' occurs responsibly and avoids negative impacts to the species and habitats and resources we want to protect into the future. We must ensure adequate protections are in place, and not make mistakes, as we transition to clean sources of energy in Washington.

More information is available on the EFSEC website, www.efsec.wa.gov.

For more information about the Yakima Valley Audubon Society, or to join, visit our website, yakimaaudubon.org.

To contact us, email info@yakimaaudubon.org.