

Savoring the Birds of Summer



gary curtis

This barred owl—whose diet includes other birds—was seen employing, as Gary Curtis put it, “a different take on the concept of ‘bird feeder.’”

By Holiday Matchett

Summer is the reason 54 species of birds come up to Guemes on the Pacific Flyway, sharing the island with another 60 species that remain here year-round. That makes summer a fine time to witness the wonder of the avian families around us. Here are a few anecdotes from local birders.

Dyvon Havens noticed that a pair of barn swallows was sitting tight (the male and female share the sitting duties) in their nest on her shed. They disappeared together one day, leaving the nest unattended. It was her chance to play detective. She placed a ladder below the nest, climbed up, and positioned a mirror above the nest. Sure enough, there were four little pink babies, each about the size of the end of a finger and sporting a bit of fluff.

Judith Horton likes to tell the tale of the violet-green swallows that have nested in her bird box for years. They have discovered that when they return to Guemes in the spring, hornets have tak-

en over their nest box the previous autumn. So the birds alert Judith that they are back: they hover around the box and peek in, but do not enter to build their new nest until Judith has performed hornet removal while they watch. Then they check on its cleanliness and enter the house for another summer’s occupation.

It is Gary Curtis, who taught many birdwatchers, humans, and dogs, how to locate a barred owl. These large owls hunt by day and night, and other birds are part of their varied diet. Gary had a sheepherding dog, Chester, who learned—as did many islanders—that the secret to finding barred owls is the racket caused by American robins. If you hear a horde of robins screeching at the top of their lungs, concentrated at a spot in the woods, you can be sure that an owl has been spotted by its potential prey. They have ganged up to keep the owl out of their nests.

During the Dog Island Run, the Matchetts walked the 10K course, and sure enough, on West Shore Road an owl was revealed by the alarmed robins

Armchair Birding

Fun for the whole family are the webcams trained on nests, viewable at cams.allaboutbirds.org. At this writing they have osprey, great blue herons, and red-tailed hawks up, and you can watch them raise their babies for several weeks.

as we walked along.

One fine story this summer is that of an adult bald eagle in the South Shore area, who spotted a Great Blue Heron hunting down in Guemes Channel. Most likely the heron had a nest in the large heronry near the refinery on Fidalgo Island. The eagle began to close in on the heron, but the alert heron lifted its 72-inch wings and beat with a steady, slow rhythm. The faster eagle beat its strong 80-inch wings, attempting to overtake the heron. But the heron had grabbed onto a thermal and was already soaring into a rising circle. The eagle reached the area and flew into a lower level of the same thermal. But no matter how the “national bird” tried, it could

not catch up. As they disappeared into the sky, it was apparent that the heron baby would eat that night and the eagle needed another tactic to feed his chicks. As Don Passarelli remarked, “Maybe our

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A List of Birds to Watch For

For the thrills: Returning turkey vultures; soaring bald eagles; red-tailed hawks persecuting great blue herons; herons chugging down voles, frogs, crabs, fish; Canada geese flying in Vs over your head; American kestrels, merlins, and sharp-shinned and Cooper’s hawks dive-bombing birds at your feeders

For the trills: Two species of chickadees, spotted towhees, song sparrows, white-crowned and golden-crowned sparrows, purple and house finches, Swainson’s thrushes, three species of flycatchers (“quick three beers”)

Feeder friends: Dark-eyed juncos, pine siskins, black-headed grosbeaks, American goldfinches, rufous hummingbirds, red crossbills, spotted towhee

Shadowy black birds: Brewer’s blackbirds, red-winged blackbirds, brown-headed cowbirds, Northwest crows, common ravens

Woodsy birds: Pacific wrens, red-breasted sapsuckers, two species of vireos, several warblers, brown creepers, varied thrushes, cedar waxwings, ruby-crowned and golden-crowned kinglets, three species of pounding woodpeckers

Water birds: Mallards, three species of mergansers, gadwalls, buffleheads, American wigeons, harlequin ducks, two species of goldeneyes, common loons, three species of cormorants, two species of scoters

On-the-edge birds: Killdeer, belted kingfishers, three species of gulls, pigeon guillemot

Beneficial bombers: Six species of swallows

“Everywhere” birds: American robins, European starlings, English sparrows

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national bird should be the great blue heron.”

If you like to walk down the beach from Kelly’s Point north to Eden’s Road access, you may have a rare opportunity to watch another resident, the pigeon guillemot, feed its young. This seabird nests in the sandy layers along the fa-

mous “Yellow Bluff.” After burrowing a hole quite a distance above high tide, it leaves its youngsters in this cliff and flies to the waters offshore, diving for small fish. If you respect its space (air and shore), you may see this black bird—with white triangular wing patches, bright red rudderlike legs, and a silver fish in its beak—fly like a missile up to its hole in the cliff. ☺