

Gearing up for the ABA Convention: Birdfinding in Eugene, Oregon

by Noah K. Strycker

NOAH K. STRYCKER

Spring rain in Eugene, Oregon, falls in gossamer sheets on the deep-green needles of evergreens, the yellow-green buds of deciduous plants and trees, and the velvety-green grass of lawns and fields. This warm rain is nothing like the dark, heavy rain of winter or the blustery, fitful rain of fall, for it signals new life, the coming of summer, and some of the best birding in the country.

As a native Oregonian, I admit I don't always think of our "liquid sunshine" in poetic terms. But, like most of the hardy birders in the northern rainforest, I have made my peace with the rain, all 43 annual inches of it. It's a small price to pay for the birds, which abound in the maritime climate, lush plant life, and diverse topography.

Eugene lies in the Willamette Valley of west-central Oregon at the heart of Lane County, just an hour's drive from the Pacific Coast to the west and the Cascade Mountains to the east. Whether you come here for the 2–8 June 2003 American Birding Association convention or on your own, you'll find plenty of birds, including western specialties such as Black Oystercatcher, Western Gull, Marbled Murrelet, Northern Spotted Owl, Northern Pygmy-Owl, Pacific-slope Flycatcher, Hammond's Flycatcher, American Dipper, Western Bluebird, Townsend's Warbler, Hermit Warbler, MacGillivray's Warbler, and Black-headed Grosbeak. You might also miss the rain. Local weather data for the past 45 years show that rain has fallen only a third of the time on 2 June, typical of the rainfall pattern for that week.

Eugene is conveniently situated near several national wildlife refuges (NWRs) offering excellent birding opportunities. These include: Malheur NWR, an oasis in the desert for waterbirds and neotrop-

ical migrants; Baskett Slough NWR, Ankeny NWR, and William L. Finley NWR, originally created to protect "Dusky" Canada Geese in the Willamette Valley but also magnets for other waterfowl and shorebirds; and coastal Bandon Marsh NWR, where incredible concentrations of shorebirds gather during migration.

Because of the wide variety of habitats surrounding Eugene, it is possible to see 100 bird species close to town during spring migration or early summer. Habitats include fields and pastures, lakes and reservoirs, ponds and wetlands, open oak savannas, and thick forests dominated by Douglas-fir. Some common species include Rufous Hummingbird, Hutton's Vireo, Violet-green Swallow, Bushtit, Wrentit, Black-throated Gray Warbler, and Lesser Goldfinch.

In the mountains to the east, different species of birds are attracted by the varying landscape, ranging from Douglas-fir and western hemlock forests to lodgepole and ponderosa pine stands. Sparkling streams, fed by snow melt, plunge into clear mountain lakes. These mountains are home to Northern Goshawk, Calliope Hummingbird, Williamson's Sapsucker, White-headed Woodpecker, Pacific-slope Flycatcher, Pygmy Nuthatch, American Dipper, Mountain Bluebird, and Hermit Warbler.

The rugged Oregon coast provides a spectacular setting for viewing many seabirds resting or nesting on sandy beaches, jutting headlands, calm estuaries, rocky areas, and towering cliffs. Attracted to these sites are Pacific Loon, Pelagic and Brandt's Cormorants, Snowy Plover, Heermann's Gull, Common Murre, Pigeon Guillemot, and Rhinoceros Auklet. According to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, more

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Seventeen-year-old NKS is a high school senior who lives near rural Creswell, Oregon. He has been a serious birder for about seven years. His bird articles, photographs, drawings, and paintings have appeared in a variety of local, regional, and national publications, including *A Bird's-Eye View*, the American Birding Association's newsletter for young birders. He works part-time conducting bird surveys and completing other field assignments for the Willamette Valley projects of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Northern Pygmy-Owls are often encountered on Spencer Butte, where this one was photographed in November 2002. Snow-capped peaks of the Cascade Mountains are visible on clear days.

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“Sooty” Fox Sparrows are common in brushy habitats around Eugene in winter. This one was photographed in December 2001 near Eugene.

seabirds nest along the Oregon coast than along the coastlines of California and Washington combined.

From the coast to the mountains, 264 species occur regularly in Lane County—the richest collection of avifauna in Oregon—plus another 125 rare species and vagrants. The mild climate permits good birding year-round, with ample seasonal variety.

Birders visiting the Eugene area from September to June should come equipped with waterproof boots and jackets. Several practical guides are available to enhance the experience, including *The Birder's Guide to Oregon* by Joseph E. Evanich, Jr. (published by the Portland Audubon Society in 1990 and available in bookstores). Also, *Northwest Birds in Winter* by Alan Contreras (list price \$17.95; ABA Sales price \$16.95) and *Birds of Lane County, Oregon: A Seasonal Checklist* (\$2.50) can be purchased from Oregon Field Ornithologists (OFO, P.O. Box 10373, Eugene OR 97440; <www.oregonbirds.org>).

Birding Sites

Eugene

Known as “The Emerald City” because of its naturally green landscape, Eugene is Oregon’s second largest city with a population of about 130,000. The city sits at an elevation of about 400 feet on the scenic Willamette and McKenzie Rivers, and offers big-city services with a small-town atmosphere. With many miles of bike paths and jogging trails around the city, several beautiful parks, the University of Oregon’s shady campus, and nearby mountains and buttes, Eugene provides many opportunities for birding. The local bus system will take you close to some of these locations, but a private vehicle is more convenient.

Alton Baker Park, between Eugene and its sister city, Springfield, sits on the Willamette River and is easily reached by foot, bicycle, car, or bus from downtown. The park includes a network of wetlands, riparian areas, ponds, a canoe canal, brushy spots, and old orchard and

garden plots that have attracted about 150 species of birds. To get to the park by vehicle, go north from downtown across the Ferry Street Bridge, turn right onto Centennial Boulevard, right again at the first light, and then left at the park entrance sign. Walk upriver on the paved path along the riparian fringe where songbirds are plentiful, stop at the pond near the center of the park to look for waterfowl and herons in the secluded backwaters, and check out the canoe canal for flycatchers, jays, swallows, and warblers. Species found in Alton Baker Park in spring include Green Heron, Warbling Vireo, Western Scrub-Jay, MacGillivray’s Warbler, Western Tanager, Lazuli Bunting, and Spotted Towhee. In winter, look for flocks of sparrows in the brushy areas, including Golden-crowned, “Sooty” Fox and Lincoln’s Sparrows, and Western Meadowlark in the grass. Plan on a couple of hours of birding time, best in morning but also productive in the afternoon.

No trip to Eugene would be complete without a hike up 2,054-foot **Spencer Butte**, the largest hill in the south hills of Eugene. About 5 minutes south of Eugene on Willamette Street, the butte is contained within a 310-acre city park with trails ranging in length from 0.5 mile to 2 miles. The 1.5-mile trail to the top offers spectacular views of the city, valley, and waterways, as well as possible sightings of Blue Grouse, Northern Pygmy-Owl, Vaux’s Swift, Pacific-slope Flycatcher, Hammond’s Flycatcher, Hutton’s Vireo, Steller’s Jay, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Varied Thrush, Hermit Warbler, and Western Tanager. Mountain Quail may be heard but is hard to see (best in morning). Spencer Butte can be birded in a couple of hours.

Skinner Butte, named after the city’s founder, Eugene Skinner, sits to the north of downtown along the Willamette River. The summit, accessible from Third Avenue East via a 0.75-mile road on the south edge or a mile-long switch-back dirt/woodchip trail on the northern

edge, provides a panoramic view of Eugene and good birding. You can find Vaux's Swift, Rufous Hummingbird, Western Scrub-Jay, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Winter Wren, Townsend's Warbler, Western Tanager, and Lesser Goldfinch among the Douglas-fir and open areas. During spring migration, sorting through mixed flocks of vireos, chickadees, nuthatches, and warblers, especially in trees around the grassy area at the top of the butte, can be a rewarding experience. Plan on at least an hour or two of birding, best in morning.

Mt. Pisgah, a 10-minute drive south-east of Eugene, gives hikers a bird's-eye view of Eugene and the surrounding area. The site comprises 2,400 acres of diverse ecological habitats, including riparian meadows, oak savannas, open plateaus, and forested hillsides, and many opportunities to see birds such as Ruffed Grouse, Northern Pygmy-Owl, Red-breasted Sapsucker, Hutton's Vireo, MacGillivray's Warbler, Black-headed Grosbeak, Lazuli Bunting, and Spotted Towhee. A fairly steep two-mile stretch of gravel road closed to vehicles takes you to the 1,500-foot summit, winding through areas of open oak, Douglas-fir, blackberry thickets, and fields. A large network of dirt, barkchip, and gravel trails, as well as an arboretum at the mountain's base, presents many opportunities for exploration. To get to Mt. Pisgah, drive south on I-5 from Eugene, take the Oregon 58 exit, and then turn at the next available road to the left, Seavey Loop Road. Continue on the meandering road until you reach a T-intersection. Turn right onto Seavey Way and cross the bridge to enter the park. Give yourself at least a couple of hours to a half day to cover the area.

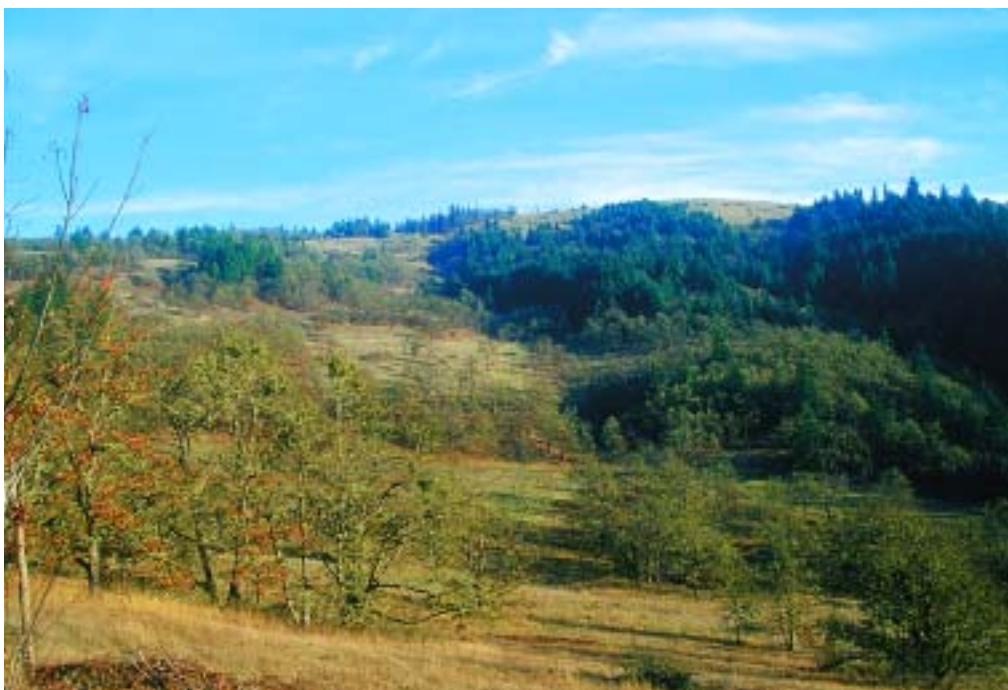
Fern Ridge Reservoir and Vicinity

Fern Ridge Reservoir, a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers project for flood control and irrigation, is waterfowl heaven. Situated 10 miles west of Eugene, about 30 minutes from downtown, the area

consists of 19 square miles of lake, marsh, riparian habitat, native wet prairie, ash and willow stands, Douglas-fir and oak groves, shallow ponds, brushy fields, and parklands. It offers some of the best birding in the Willamette Valley. Tens of thousands of waterfowl winter here, and many remain to nest. Raptors, shorebirds, gulls, neotropical migrants, and sparrows are present in large numbers in the appropriate seasons. Fern Ridge is also a hotspot for rare birds. To get to Fern Ridge, drive west out of town on Eleventh Avenue, which becomes Oregon 126. Before your trip, you can download Fern Ridge area maps and a species list from the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife Fern Ridge Wildlife Area website at <www.dfw.state.or.us/odfwhtml/frwa/frwa.html>.

The western end of **Royal Avenue** provides access to Fern Ridge's extensive marsh habitat. This state wildlife man-

agement area consists of a large network of dikes, marshes, croplands, grasslands, and brushy spots, which invites some potentially spectacular birding. As you go out West Eleventh Avenue from downtown, turn right onto Fisher Road and after 1 mile turn left onto Royal Avenue. Just west of the junction, stop and park on the shoulder next to the oak grove. Here is the only reliable place to find Acorn Woodpeckers in the Eugene area—they should appear within a couple of minutes. Continue 0.5 mile to the gate at the end of Royal Avenue and park. Walk past the gate on the gravel road for a few hundred yards and turn left onto the intersecting dike system. Just about any of these dikes will take you to good birding. I often opt for the dike heading west, which leads to the lake's edge and through some nice marshy expanses. In spring, the marshes and brushy spots around Royal Avenue hold a variety of species, including



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Just a ten-minute drive southeast of Eugene, Mt. Pisgah offers 2,400 acres of diverse habitats, including riparian meadows, oak savannas, open plateaus, and forested hillsides. Along the gravel path to the summit, look for Ruffed Grouse, Red-breasted Sapsucker, MacGillivray's Warbler, and Lazuli Bunting.

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Osprey, Virginia Rail, Sora, Black Tern, Purple Martin, Lazuli Bunting, Western Meadowlark, Yellow-headed Blackbird, Bullock's Oriole, and a variety of waterfowl and shorebirds. In winter, the bushes here are known to host large flocks of sparrows, which have occasional American Tree, Harris's, and White-throated Sparrows mixed in with the regulars. Plan about 2–3 hours; best birding is in the morning.

The north end of the reservoir, where **Fern Ridge Dam** blocks the Long Tom River, provides the best viewing of the reservoir pool. From the top of the dam, using a scope, it is possible to see the vast assortment of waterfowl and gulls on the lake. This spot is especially strategic in winter, when many cormorants, egrets, swans, geese, ducks, and gulls populate the area. From West Eleventh Avenue (Oregon 126), turn south on Greenhill Road, turn left after 3.5 miles onto Clear Lake Road, and proceed another 5 miles to Kirk Park. From the parking area, walk underneath the highway on a paved path, then climb a flight of stairs to the top of the dam. Kirk Park itself also can be birdy at any time of year. This section of the Long Tom River contains some of the largest remaining areas of riparian habitat in the southern Willamette Valley. Take up to an hour to scope from the dam and another hour to walk around Kirk Park.

Perkins Peninsula State Park, located on the southern side of the reservoir, is an ideal place to scope shorebirds in the fall, especially during periods of low water. In addition to common species, such as Semipalmated Plover, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Western and Least Sandpipers, Long-billed Dowitcher, and Wilson's Snipe, rare shorebirds are sometimes reported. In the fall of 2002, local birders were delighted by the appearance of a Ruff and a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper on the same weekend. Besides shorebirds, Perkins is known for songbirds, particularly in spring. Walk around the small park and check the

trees and shrubs for Western Wood-Pewee, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, White-breasted Nuthatch, Swainson's Thrush, Black-throated Gray Warbler, and Spotted Towhee. The park is easily accessible from West Eleventh Avenue (Oregon 126). Turn right at the park entrance 2.5 miles from the intersection of West Eleventh Avenue and Fisher Road. A small daily admission fee is charged per vehicle on weekends and holidays from Memorial Day through Labor Day. Give yourself an hour or two to scope the lake and tour the park.

Florence

About an hour's drive west of Eugene lies the windswept coastal community of Florence, where the forest meets the ocean's edge. This city of 7,000, situated amid the Oregon Dunes and Siltcoos Recreation Areas, provides a host of birding opportunities with a chance to see many coastal species not found

inland, backdropped by some of the most dramatic coastline in the West. From Eugene, drive west on Oregon 126. The highway cuts through the forested Coast Range and ends at Florence.

Start at the **south jetty of the Siuslaw River** west of town. To reach this area, head south on U.S. 101 out of Florence and turn west about 0.75 mile south of the Siuslaw River Bridge onto the South Jetty Road. Pass the fee station (a small daily admission fee covers all U.S. Forest Service sites visited that day) and stop at the pullout on the right side of the road where the trees yield to open space. Park and walk the short distance down to a small pond; songbirds may be seen in the trees, and shorebirds and ducks may be on the water. Continue driving toward the jetty through scrubby open habitat until you arrive at more pullouts on the right, overlooking the Siuslaw River. Park and scan the water and the



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A number of gull species may be seen on the Oregon Coast, including these Heermann's and Western Gulls. This flock was photographed on the southern Oregon Coast in July 2002.

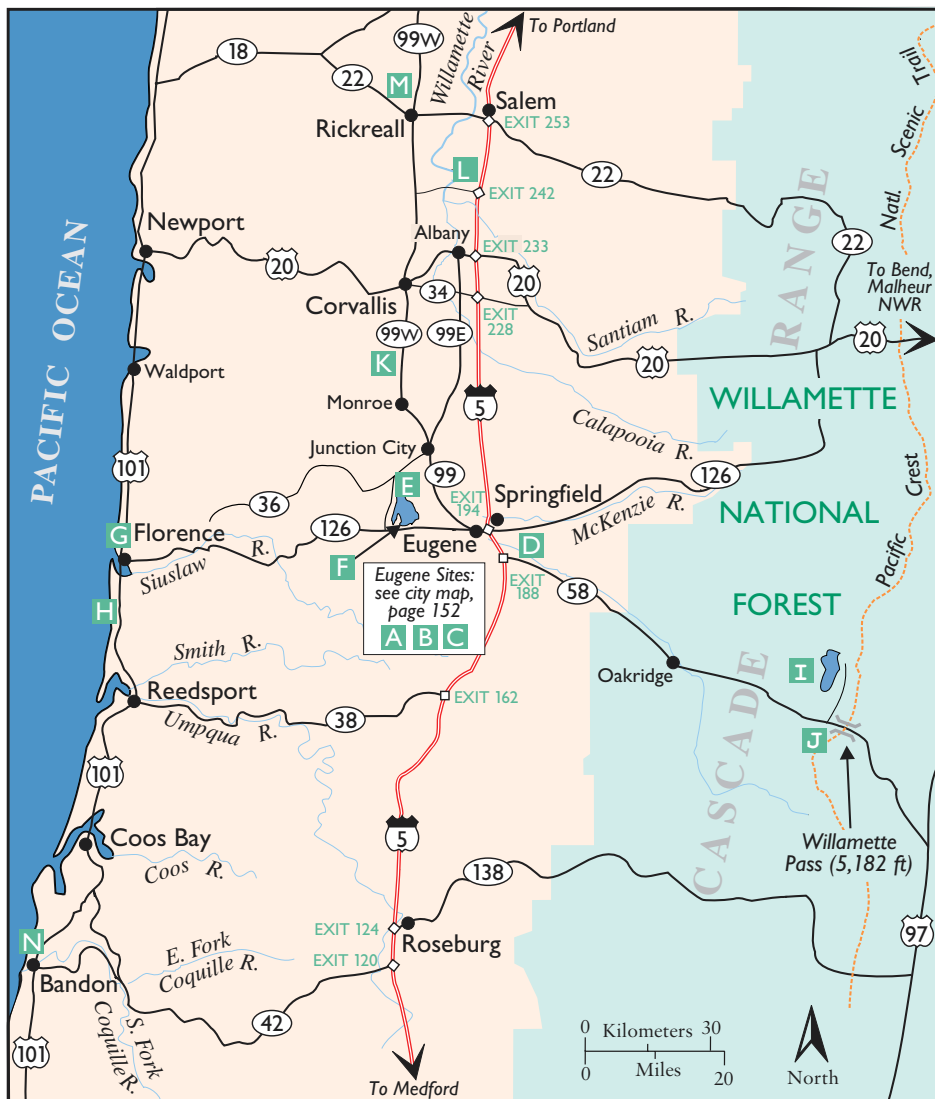
shoreline for waterbirds, and pish the bushes for sparrows and other songbirds. Drive on to the jetty parking lot and take a more extended walk along the jetty itself. Scope the birds floating on the river mouth and on the open ocean. This is an excellent place to do some sea-watching, if you are so inclined. Black Turnstone, Surfbird, and the occasional Rock Sandpiper are on the jetties in winter. Double-crested, Brandt's, and Pelagic Cormorants, Pigeon Guillemot, Marbled Murrelet, and Rhinoceros Auklet may be seen at any time of the year. The South Jetty area can be covered in a couple of hours.

Florence's Old Town section sits on the Siuslaw River, a reliable place to see loons, grebes, cormorants, mergansers, and gulls, especially in winter. Several restaurants on the bayfront provide good birding while you eat. A couple of winters ago, a Yellow-billed Loon swimming around the docks was discovered by restaurant-goers.

While you are in the area, visit the outlet of the Siltcoos River south of Florence to view shorebirds, especially in fall. About 7 miles south of Florence on U.S. 101, turn west onto Siltcoos Beach Road; park at a pullout near the gravel road about 0.5 mile west of the bridge leading into Waxmyrtle Campground. From here, walk out to the mudflats and look for shorebirds on the beach. Snowy Plovers are present year-round, but their nesting area is closed off during the summer. Also check the trees and bushes for passerines. A small daily admission fee covers all Forest Service sites visited that day (you'll be covered if you already paid the fee at the South Jetty). Spend about an hour at this site.

Waldo Lake and Salt Creek Falls

A 1.5-hour drive into the Cascade Mountains southeast of Eugene will bring you to Waldo Lake, the largest lake in Lane County and one of the purest bodies of water in the world. Contained within the Willamette National Forest,



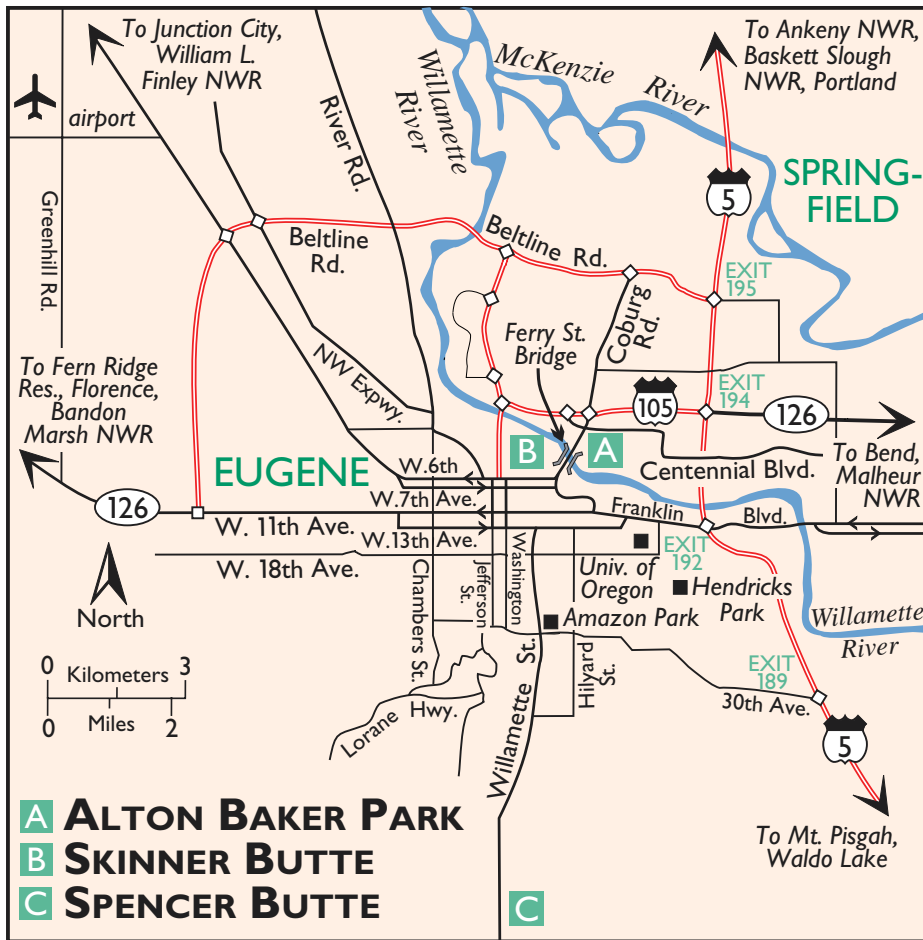
EUGENE AREA BIRDING SITES

- | | | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| A Alton Baker Park | F Perkins Peninsula State Park | K William L. Finley NWR |
| B Skinner Butte | G Florence | L Ankeny NWR |
| C Spencer Butte | H Siltcoos River | M Baskett Slough NWR |
| D Mt. Pisgah | I Waldo Lake | N Bandon Marsh NWR |
| E Fern Ridge Reservoir | J Salt Creek Falls | |

the lake is nestled against the densely forested Waldo Lake Wilderness on the north, west, and south sides and is circled by the 22-mile-long Waldo Lake Trail. Mosquitoes don't usually ease up until late summer, so bring insect repellent. You can reach the lake by driving

south from Eugene on I-5, taking the Oregon 58 exit, continuing east for 59 miles on Oregon 58 (passing through the town of Oakridge), and turning north off the highway just west of Willamette Pass onto well-marked Waldo Lake Road (Forest Service Road

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#5897). Proceed about 13 miles to the North Waldo Campground (there is a small day-use fee, which covers all U.S. Forest Service sites visited that day). Black-backed and Three-toed Woodpeckers are in the area, but they prefer burned areas (the North Waldo Fire burn along a dirt road to the north of the campground is the most recent). Northern Goshawk, Northern Pygmy-Owl, Red-breasted Sapsucker, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Mountain Chickadee, Varied Thrush, Hermit Warbler, and Red Crossbill are also present. Just a short distance west of the turn to Waldo Lake, stop at the roadside Salt Creek Falls Picnic Area (a small day use fee is charged, which covers both Waldo Lake and Salt Creek Falls). This is the most powerful waterfall in southern Oregon and the second highest waterfall in the

state. It is also the most reliable place in Oregon to see Black Swift, which presumably nests under the falls. The campground upstream can be checked for birds such as Northern Waterthrush, which has nested there, and American Dipper. Plan a full day for Waldo Lake and Salt Creek Falls.

National Wildlife Refuges

Three national wildlife refuges in the Willamette Valley just off I-5 north of Eugene (William L. Finley NWR, Ankeny NWR, and Baskett Slough NWR) were created primarily to protect and manage wintering habitat for “Dusky” Canada Geese. Many other waterfowl and songbirds frequent these refuge lands. To get to William L. Finley NWR, take Exit 228 (Corvallis) off I-5. Go south from Corvallis on Oregon

99W about 10 miles; turn west at the entrance sign and follow signs about 4 miles to the refuge office. This refuge encompasses multiple habitats, including oak and maple woodlands, ash and Douglas-fir stands, hedgerows, marshes, creeks, meadows, and pastures, which attract several species of ducks—Wood Duck and Hooded Merganser are common summer nesters—as well as Ruffed Grouse, Ring-necked Pheasant, and California Quail. Ankeny NWR may be reached from I-5 by exiting at Ankeny Hill and following Wintel Road West for about two miles to the refuge boundary. Agricultural bottomland, hedgerows, ash and Douglas-fir, and grass and grain crops dominate the area. Look for herons, hawks, quails, shorebirds, woodpeckers, and songbirds. To get to Baskett Slough NWR from downtown Eugene, take West Sixth Avenue, which becomes Oregon 99N. Continue on 99N through the community of Junction City, then take Oregon 99W through Corvallis until you reach Rickreall. From Rickreall, continue for about two miles to the refuge entrance. Here, typical Willamette Valley hillsides, oak knolls, grassy fields, and wetlands draw an assortment of waterfowl, woodpeckers, and songbirds. You’ll need a day to fully explore these refuges.

On the coast about a three-hour drive southwest of Eugene, Bandon Marsh NWR is a mecca for wading birds, waterfowl, raptors, and shorebirds. The refuge, established in 1983, protects the largest remaining tract of salt marsh within the Coquille River estuary. At the height of spring and fall migration, thousands of birds may be seen on the mudflats. The refuge is located on the southern Oregon coast, near the mouth of the Coquille River and the small city of Bandon. From Eugene, drive south on I-5 and take Exit 162 (Reedsport), following Oregon 38 to the coast. From Reedsport, drive south on U.S. 101 to Bandon. If you are already in Florence, just head south on U.S. 101 to Bandon.

The refuge is accessible from boat launches at the Port of Bandon and by vehicle from Riverside Drive, which connects U.S. 101 and downtown Bandon. Park at the pullout along Riverside Drive (by the refuge sign) and walk out the short boardwalk to a viewing platform. A spotting scope will help you identify birds farther out on the mudflats, but binoculars are fine for the closer wildlife. Besides incredible concentrations of shorebirds in spring and fall, the area attracts a variety of migratory waterfowl, raptors, wading birds, and neotropical migrants. Some common visitors include Great Egret, several species of ducks, Peregrine Falcon, Black-bellied Plover, Dunlin, and Western and Least Sandpipers. Among the more uncommon species are Pacific and American Golden-Plovers, Willet, Marbled Godwit, Red Knot, and Pectoral Sandpiper. Occasionally, a fortunate birder may discover a rare bird (among others, Bar-tailed Godwit and Great Knot have been seen). The marsh and viewing platform are open daily from sunrise to sunset. Give yourself a day for the round-trip drive and birding.

If you're planning an extended stay, treat yourself to a three-day trip to Malheur NWR in southeastern Oregon, a 185,000-acre desert oasis for waterfowl about a five-hour drive east of Eugene. The brown, parched high desert of eastern Oregon is a world apart from the green western side of the state. Here, birds find refuge in the waters at Malheur (pronounced *mal-hewer*). The name means "misfortune" in French, reflecting the bad luck of original inhabitant Peter French, an unpopular rancher shot off his horse by a competitor in 1897. But birds and birders are fortunate that this wildlife refuge was established in 1908. Malheur encompasses one of the most expansive wetland complexes in North America, stretching 39 miles wide and 40 miles long in a T-shape, and sweeping across marshes, uplands, and lake beds up into rimrocks and sage-



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The Old Town section of Florence, situated on Siuslaw River Bay, is a reliable place to see gulls, loons, cormorants, mergansers, and grebes.



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The mouth of the Siuslaw River near Florence attracts flocks of Black Turnstones and Surf-birds. This Surf-bird was photographed on the south jetty in February 2001.

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The south jetty of the Siuslaw River west of Florence offers excellent opportunities to view Rhinoceros Auklet, Pigeon Guillemot, Marbled Murrelet, and Pelagic, Brandt's, and Double-crested Cormorants.



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Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in eastern Oregon is an oasis for waterbirds, providing an expansive wetland complex in the parched high desert.

brush-covered hills at about 4,000 feet above sea level. In all, more than 320 species have been observed on the refuge, including Black-crowned Night-Heron, Trumpeter Swan, Golden Eagle, Greater Sage-Grouse, American Avocet, Long-billed Curlew, Forster's Tern, Common Nighthawk, Say's Phoebe, Loggerhead Shrike, Wilson's Warbler, Black-headed Grosbeak, Sage Sparrow, Western Meadowlark, and Bullock's Oriole. In spring, Malheur explodes with migrating birds, including thousands of Snow Geese and "Lesser" Sandhill Cranes. From Eugene, drive east on Oregon 126 and Oregon 20 over the Cascade Mountains to Bend, and then on to the desert community of Burns. From here, take Oregon 205 south for about 28 miles and follow the signs to refuge headquarters. At the headquarters, you can pick up a free species checklist, find out about recent sightings, and observe the many species of birds that flock to the trees. Then, take at least a day to explore the various locations on the refuge: the Center Patrol Road, Buena Vista Overlook, Benson Pond, Krumbo Reservoir, Frenchglen, P Ranch, and Page Springs Campground. To help plan your trip and download a species checklist, go to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's Malheur National Wildlife Refuge website at <pacific.fws.gov/malheur>. The John Scharff Migratory Bird Festival & Art Show each spring, sponsored by the Harney County Chamber of Commerce, can help you become better acquainted with the area (for details, see the website at <www.harneycounty.com>).

Acknowledgements

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Gear Up at ABA Sales

for the ABA Eugene Convention

Eugene, Oregon • 2-8 June 2003

SOME WORKSHOPS AND FIELD TRIPS STILL AVAILABLE!

Contact Nanci Hawley at 800/850-2473, ext.233 or nhawley@aba.org

Northwest Birds in Winter

Alan Contreras
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