

# Home on the Refuge

by Noah K. Strycker

At Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in remote eastern Oregon, the field staff uses a sure-fire way to distinguish visiting birders from locals. They observe a motorist's reaction to a herd of cows on the road. Out-of-towners wait for the cows to cross. Locals plow right through, trusting that the beasts will mosey. If you stop for cows, insiders know that you could sit there forever.

This and many other lessons I learned when I volunteered and lived at Malheur NWR (541-493-2612, <http://malheur.fws.gov>) for three months. From September to November, at the age of 17, I became a refuge insider.

I discovered a world not quite like the one I had known as a lifetime visitor and birder to this waterfowl Mecca. It was a blast getting to know the refuge from the inside out, yet the experience wasn't exactly what I expected.

The refuge is a 185,000-acre oasis in the desert for more than 300 species of birds. A system of marshes, ponds, sloughs, lakes and wetlands provides habitat for residents and migrants ranging from Sandhill Cranes and Snow Geese to songbirds, American Avocets and Black-necked Stilts. Refuge time passes slowly, marked by seasons and weather instead of hours and days. The people who manage the land view things differently than the birders who flock in for a weekend.

One day, my supervisor sent me to a seldom-visited part of the refuge known as Stinking Lake—a site closed perma-

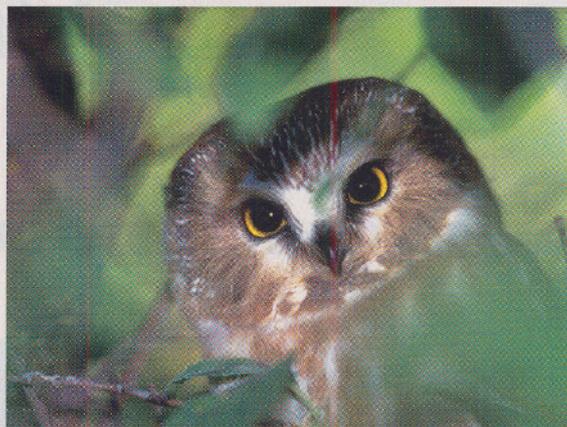
nently to the public, protecting wildlife and prehistoric human artifacts. I coaxed the refuge pickup over 20 miles of dirt roads and parked on a wide alkali flat.

The sun beat down as I walked the last mile over rough ground, kicking aside obsidian chips and keeping an eye out for rattlesnakes. Suddenly, Stinking Lake spread before me, assaulting my nose and offering a treasure trove of Snowy Plovers, American Avocets, Black-necked Stilts, Northern Shovelers, Franklin's Gulls and Sage Thrashers. What a rush!

Among Oregonians, Malheur is known for the rare birds that consistently appear. I saw my fair share of celebrities, including a Yellow-throated Warbler and a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher. Being an insider gave me front-row access to something more exciting: the spectacle of common species in daily life.

On Halloween morning, I awoke to find the first snow of the season—and hundreds of Tundra Swans and thousands of Snow and Ross's Geese and Sandhill Cranes migrating south over my house. I watched the last warblers and vireos stream through and the appearances of the first Bald Eagles, Northern Shrikes and Barrow's Goldeneye.

Being on the spot also gave me some juicy photographic opportunities. One morning at refuge headquarters, I encountered a sleepy Northern Saw-whet Owl hiding in a bush. Lying flat on my back, I



NORTHERN SAW-WHET OWL BY NOAH K. STRYCKER

sidled up to the bush. For a brief moment, the owl opened its eyes and stared down. That moment is captured for eternity, a surprised owl's face framed by green leaves and centered on two piercing yellow eyes.

The birds kept me going while the isolation occasionally wore me down. Most of my friends were at college; I lived alone in the volunteer house on the refuge 30 miles from the nearest teenager. Just gassing up or buying groceries meant a half-day excursion. I kept company with the wildlife and became self-sufficient, changing flat tires and nursing myself through illness.

The refuge staff befriended, encouraged and gently taught me. I was amazed at how a few hard-working people intensely manage the place, mowing fields and planting crops to entice cranes and geese, damming ponds and pumping water to specific areas. Left alone, the water would mostly dry up, marshes would revert to sagebrush, and birds would bypass the refuge more often.

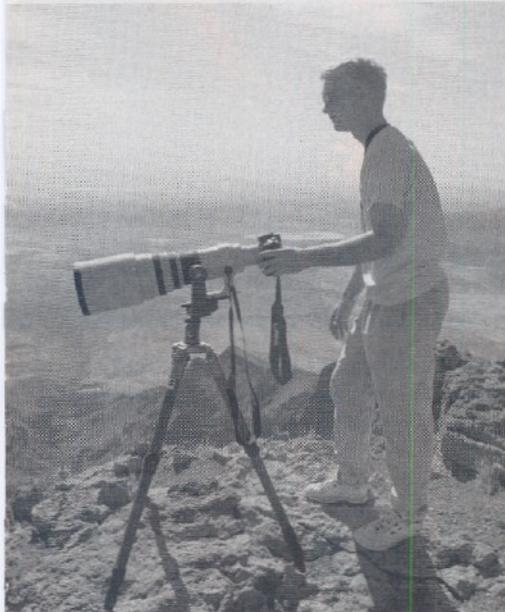
I found it interesting, and ironic, that most of the staff hunted avidly, spending their off-hours stalking anything from quail to bighorn sheep. They dedicated themselves to preserving wildlife but enjoyed it differently than I did.

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My days filled with a range of projects, such as counting birds, locating wells, building fences, entering data, helping with special events, taking photographs and making drawings for interpretive displays. I often manned the small visitor center, wearing my blue volunteer T-shirt. Life was good.

It could only be temporary, though. With the arrival of winter, the visitor parking lot emptied, and most of the birds had migrated. It was time for me to move on.

Now that I am studying at Oregon State University, I often think of that place and time when I was a real refuge insider. Some secrets I will never forget—like how to navigate through a herd of cows.



COURTESY OF BOB KEEFER

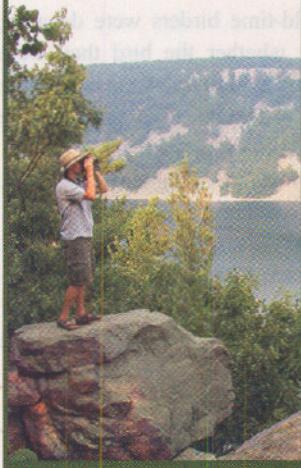
### And One More Thing

Did you know that in tennis, a bird is considered a "hindrance?" The rule states that a point should be replayed if a ball strikes a flying bird. In my many competitive matches, somehow this has never happened, though I have watched birds migrate overhead (if I'm playing outdoors) or observed trapped birds trying to escape (if I'm playing indoors). Maybe I'd win more matches if I spent more time watching the ball rather than the birds! How does birding fit into your life? E-mail me: [birdboy@bkpix.com](mailto:birdboy@bkpix.com)

College freshman Noah K. Strycker writes about, photographs, draws and studies birds.



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