

# FOCUS

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## Wondrous Watching



PHOTO BY KEN LEVY

**Above:** A double-crested cormorant takes wing at the Hagerman Wildlife Management Area in southeast Idaho. Thousands of waterfowl can be seen on the many ponds at the WMA, depending on the season. The area is part of the Idaho Birding Trail, sponsored by the Idaho Department of Fish and Game. The WMA gets its water from the Snake River, and is an ideal birdwatching location. **Below:** Lifetime birder Jim Holcomb checks bird populations at Wilson Springs Ponds in Nampa during a guided bird walk in November. A good pair of binoculars, a field guide for identifying birds and plenty of patience help maximize the birding experience.

## Birders make no flap about getting out to see their favorites



PHOTO BY KEN LEVY

**By Ken Levy**

SPECIAL TO THE IBR

Dick and Cheryl Lawson's Boise backyard bush resembles a Christmas tree, with little brown birds ("LBB") serving as living ornaments.

They've also served as lunch. A sharp-shinned hawk visited the Lawson's arborvitae in early March, and the raptor treated the tree like a buffet restaurant, snatching small birds for quick meals.

LBB is birdwatcher slang for the numerous species of birds

that are camouflaged to blend in with their habitat. Because they can be finches, sparrows or other birds, they are hard to tell apart, even by experienced birders.

Birds don't have to be rare or gaudily colored to be attractive and fascinating to bird watchers. From sparrows to doves, "we love and enjoy them all," said Cheryl.

Despite the joys of backyard birding, the couple quickly learned that "birding can also take you to places you never thought you would go," Dick said. "The exciting thing is

when you realize there's a pocket of wildlife in an area you've just driven by but not spent the time to look. Birding makes you slow down and get to notice an area."

"Dick and I started exploring Idaho, going on Forest Service roads, birding little streams," Cheryl said.

One of their most memorable birding experiences was a guided trip to the annual Sage Grouse Days in April, in the tiny eastern Idaho town of Dubois.

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# For Idaho birding enthusiasts, there's plenty to see

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"This is the time of year when the sage grouse are booming at their leks," Cheryl said. Leks are strutting grounds for males who compete for females with their booming mating displays.

"It was really exciting to see that. The guy who was doing the most booming was attracting the most females," she said.

Many of those in attendance for the performances included biologists, sagebrush specialists and other professionals. Besides leading the trip and explaining the birds' behaviors and habitat, they directed the birders to a nearby location to see owls.

"It was a wonderful, quiet hedgerow, and there were these wonderful great horned owls," Cheryl said. "There's just a sense of absolute wonder when you can get that close to something that you've only seen very rarely."

When it comes to identifying birds, the couple works as a team, with one describing the various marks and colors while the other matches these to a field guide.

"When you start naming them it changes the whole relationship, and they get personalities," said Dick. "Then you want to know more about them, what they do, whether they migrate."

For Dick, that relationship really kicked in when he saw lazuli bunting, a beautiful vivid blue and cinnamon migrating bird that loves Idaho's shrubs.

"They come in here around early April, and the Golden Eagle Audubon Society Web site provides reports of when they pass through the area," Cheryl said.

The couple said birding newcomers should give serious thought to birding with experienced guides who will help them spot, locate and identify different species, and will share some of the best places to see them. The Golden Eagle Audubon Society, for example, led birders on a fall trip to the Idaho Bird Observatory at Lucky Peak to watch researchers band tiny saw-whet owls. GEAS offers programs year-round for bird enthusiasts.

Some organizations offer Birding Buddies programs, pairing knowledgeable birders with novices for in-the-field birding experiences. Armed with high-powered spotting scopes and trained eyes and ears, Buddies volunteer to help newbies find, see and identify birds.

"We saw 27 different species in the middle of December, near Swan Falls Dam," said Cheryl. "They also give birding walks at Hulls Gulch and Kathryn Albertsons Park."

Jim Holcomb of the Southwestern Idaho Birders Association led a group of birding enthusiasts from SIBA on a bird watching hike in the Wilson Springs Ponds area south of Nampa in mid-November. The site is part of the Idaho Birding Trail system operated by the Idaho Fish and Game's Watchable Wildlife Program.

"It's usually a very good place to see some birds close up, especially waterfowl," said Holcomb. "We also see songbirds and some other birds that might be lurking in the Russian olive trees."

Two of the spring-fed ponds are conducive to waterfowl populations all winter, he said, since water temperatures can hover around 50 degrees.

"Ducks gather in great numbers here," he said. "We get a lot of migrating birds, but we also have some that winter over."

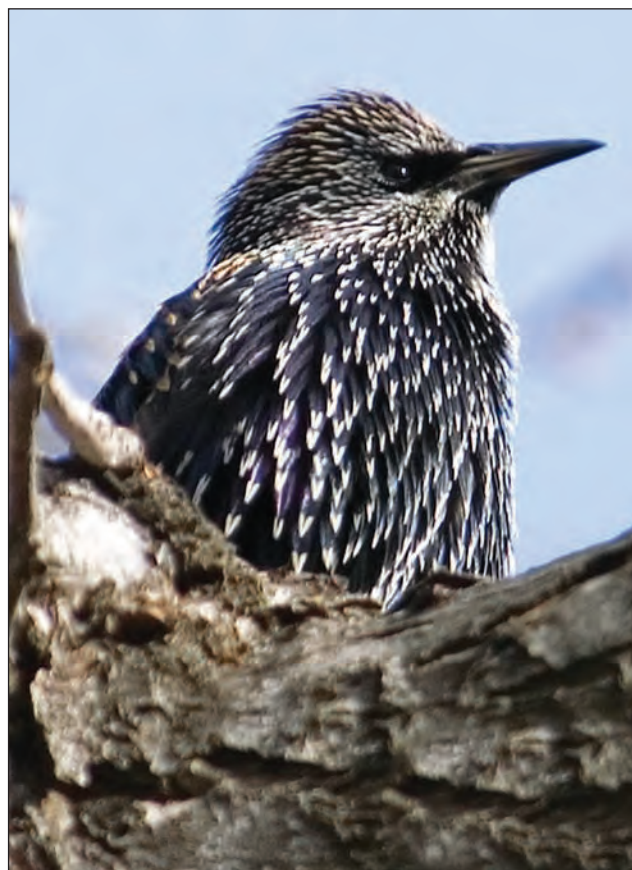
Birding has interested Holcomb for more than 60 years. He put up bird feeders at grade school, earned the Boy Scout birding merit badge and has a degree in wildlife management, specializing in ornithology. He served as a park ranger with the National Park Service, leading nature walks and reporting on conditions of wildlife including birds. He retired in 1997 and came back to Nampa.

Holcomb said fall and early winter are excellent times of the year to see migrating birds.

"We get interesting birds this time of year, and you never know what you'll see," he said. "After the breeding season and beginning in August and September you start to see birds that are returning to their wintering grounds. Sometimes they don't do it directly, they wander a little and take indirect routes."

Amateur and professional birders alike gather for annual Audubon Society bird counts. In the winter, these are scheduled for Christmas bird counts, and several are organized in southwestern Idaho, Holcomb said. Birders gather before sunup, are assigned to teams, and count the number of species and the number of birds from each species for as long as they can during the 24-hour count.

For each community or locale participating in the count, a 15-mile diameter location is determined with its center situated to maximize the opportunity to see the



PHOTOS BY KEN LEVY

**Top left:** Great blue herons are common sights at Boise's many parks. Birders revel in opportunities to study birds' beauty, form, grace and color. **Top right:** A great horned owl keeps an eye on its territory in the Hulls Gulch area of the Boise foothills. **Bottom left:** A European starling displays its fall and winter plumage in a Boise backyard. Numerous and aggressive, the bird is considered a nuisance by many, but it is of interest to birders because of its intriguing plumage and excellent singing and mimicking abilities. **Bottom right:** A male American goldfinch feeds on Nyger thistle at a backyard feeder in Boise. Its brilliant yellow color fades during the winter, similar to the more drab colors of the female.



PHOTO BY KEN LEVY

A female (left) and male bufflehead join the charge for cover with American coots on the water at Wilson Spring Ponds in Nampa.

largest number and/or variety of birds. Those locations are fixed, not relocated from year to year.

"One of the most important things about the

Christmas bird count is that you have comparative figures of bird numbers and varieties, to see what's happening in the world of birds," said Holcomb.