

Bluebirds & Meadowlarks, Eagles & Ospreys

Three of these birds have made a comeback, and we have hope for the fourth. All of them tell us something about the history of land use in the Willamette Valley.

Western Bluebirds

Champoeg is one of the best places to see real western bluebirds—small, quiet, and intensely blue. Unfortunately, it also one of the *few* places left where you can see western bluebirds.

Before settlement began in the early 19th century, the Willamette Valley provided an ideal habitat, and bluebirds were extremely common. The birds nested in cavities—holes in old or dead trees—in the thick forests that grew along the rivers and streams. During the day, they flew out onto the prairies to find insects and berries.

Settlers plowed the prairies to create their farms. But the 19th-century pattern of small farms, inter-



Prescott Bluebird Recovery Project

A metal band with a unique identifier is placed on the leg of a western bluebird. Banding is an essential part of the restoration program, helping volunteers to understand the ups and downs of bluebird populations here at Champoeg and throughout the Willamette Valley.

Key Concepts

- Once common at Champoeg, western bluebirds, western meadowlarks, bald eagles, and ospreys had all disappeared because of human-caused environmental changes.
- When people took steps to correct the problems, three of these species—bluebirds, eagles, and ospreys—returned to the park.
- We are still searching for a way to bring back the meadowlarks.

persed with clearings and woodlands, was still good bluebird habitat. Even the old-fashioned wooden fenceposts often had cavities for nests. Bluebirds remained a common sight into the early 20th century.

Problems began when the valley shifted to large-scale agriculture. Bluebird homes and food sources were cleared away to create the large fields we see today. House sparrows and European starlings—cavity-nesters introduced from England—pushed the remaining bluebirds out of the lowlands and into the hills. By the mid-1940s, only a few bluebirds could be found in places like Ladd Hill near Sherwood, or Parrett and Chehalem Mountains near Newberg.

In the 1970s, a bird-lover named Hubert



Brian Z Snyder

The bluebird comeback depends on human intervention. This includes houses, predator control, and in this case, mealworms to improve chick survival during cold snaps.

Prescott began putting up nest boxes and monitoring bluebird populations. Volunteers joined in, and then organized the Prescott Bluebird Recovery Project, a non-profit organization. By erecting nest boxes in the right locations, controlling predators such as cats and raccoons, banding and monitoring the birds, and occasionally supplying a little extra food, they make it possible for bluebirds to return to Champoeg and other grassy areas in the Willamette Valley.

Unfortunately, the bluebird comeback depends on human intervention. In all likelihood, if the volunteers were to suddenly stop their efforts, the bluebird population would dwindle to its pre-1970s level.

Western Meadowlarks

Western meadowlarks, Oregon's state bird, were once common throughout the state. Today, while they remain common in central and

eastern Oregon, they have virtually disappeared from the Willamette Valley. At Champoeg, a dozen pairs or more may pass through in winter, but are gone by the spring nesting season.

Unlike bluebirds, meadowlarks nest on the ground, in grassland. Although large-scale agriculture has greatly reduced meadowlark habitat, there should still be enough grassland to support at least small populations. Yet something discourages them, and they will not stay.

The problem may be caused by the exotic grasses, such as meadow foxtail, that have been introduced into the Willamette Valley. They grow taller and thicker than the native species they displaced, perhaps making it impossible for the birds to nest. In 2004, hoping to find a grass length that would satisfy the birds, the park tried a special mowing schedule that created several areas with different grass lengths. Unfortunately it didn't work, and the mowing was halted.

Our next hope lies with the park's dry prairie restoration project. By 2009, 40 acres of native grasses should be well established. If this fails to attract nesting meadowlarks, we will have to wait for ornithologists to come up with another idea.

Eagles and Ospreys

It has been many years since bald eagles have nested at the park. But they do nest elsewhere along the Willamette River, and there's no reason they couldn't do so here as well. They can be seen occasionally at any time of year, but are most common in spring.

Ospreys (sometimes called "fishhawks") are seasonal visitors, arriving in early April to nest and raise young, and then going south again in early September. For several years a pair has been nesting on our osprey pole by the wet prairie. Other pairs nest in the vicinity, making ospreys a common summer sight and sound.

Both eagles and ospreys, along with many others species, nearly disappeared a few decades ago.



Portland General Electric (PGE) has played an important role in restoring Willamette Valley ospreys, putting up nesting poles and monitoring bird populations. Here they check egg quality at Champoeg.



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Although habitat loss was a problem, the main culprit was a pesticide called DDT. Heavily used after World War II until it was banned in 1972, DDT was once very effective against insects,¹ and helped to push back mosquito-born diseases such as malaria.

Unfortunately, the chemical accumulated in predator birds, causing the shells of their eggs to be too thin for embryos to develop. Populations collapsed. In 1976, only 11 osprey nests could be found in the Willamette Valley. There were no eagle nests at all.

But with the removal of DDT from the market, and with human help, both these birds have made a remarkable comeback. In the year 2000, 202 osprey nests were counted in the valley, and there are many more than that today. As of 2003, up to 25 pairs of bald eagles were in the valley, with 458 total pairs in Oregon and along the lower Columbia River.

¹ The use of DDT was discontinued because of environmental concerns, but also because it stopped working. After years of exposure, insects had developed resistance.

What are the large birds soaring over Champoeg?

(Top) Ospreys (wingspan 5 feet 3 inches) may show some grey and white coloring, and usually make short, shrill whistling sounds as they fly.

(Middle) Turkey vultures (5 feet 7 inches) are the most common soaring birds. Notice the “dihedral”—the V-shape made by their wings when they soar.

(Bottom) Bald eagles (6 feet 8 inches), on the other hand, hold their wings straight out like flying boards. Adults have white heads and tails, making them distinct from any other bird. You are least likely to see eagles at Champoeg.





FARM & RESIDENCE OF FRANCIS FELLER NEAR BUTTEVILLE, MARION CO. OR.

Willamette Valley farms of the 19th century, with their small fields, pastures, woodlots, and wooden fences, had little effect on bird populations. But this changed when large-scale agriculture and pesticides were introduced in the mid-20th century.

Further Reading

- The best way of identify birds is by using a bird guide. The Museum Bookstore at the park's Visitor Center carries a variety of bird guides.
- At the Visitor Center, ask for the list of birds that have been seen at Champoeg.
- On the web see <http://www.fws.gov/species/> The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is responsible for threatened and endangered species.
- On the web see http://oregonprogress.oregonstate.edu/story.php?S_No=118&storyType=oap&page=1 to read about the restoration of bald eagles in Oregon.
- Also visit <http://prescottbluebird.com/>, the web site for the Prescott Bluebird Recovery Project.
- To learn why there were prairies in the Willamette Valley, and about the park's prairie restoration project, read the handout called "Prairie Restoration at Champoeg."

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