

Birds, canoeists flock to BR

By Mark R. Johnson

I pressed the binoculars to my eyes and scanned, first glassing left to right, then back again, my vision swinging in that neither-here-nor-there myopic tunnel of magnification. Finally I zeroed in on the nest and focused on the tuft of gray-brown that blended perfectly into the late winter landscape: a great horned owl. He scowled. I smiled back. And so another species joined our budding bird list for the day.

I wouldn't have seen the owl without Bryan Dixon of the Bridgerland Audubon Society, our guide for the morning. From his canoe, just ahead of ours, Bryan was helping those of us a little less versed in the feathered world. He'd pointed out the jumbled nest atop a snag in the distance, then identified its occupant.

My wife and I, along with nine other participants, had joined Bryan and co-leader Jean Lown

with the Bridgerland Audubon Society to make a birding field-trip down a section of the Bear River. With spring migration underway, the excursion was well timed for bird sightings.

After convoying to the put-in northwest of Logan, and readying our seven canoes along the riverbanks, several of us drove vehicles to the take-out and then carpooled back. It took only a few minutes to make the drive; the canoeing, though, would unfold over several hours.

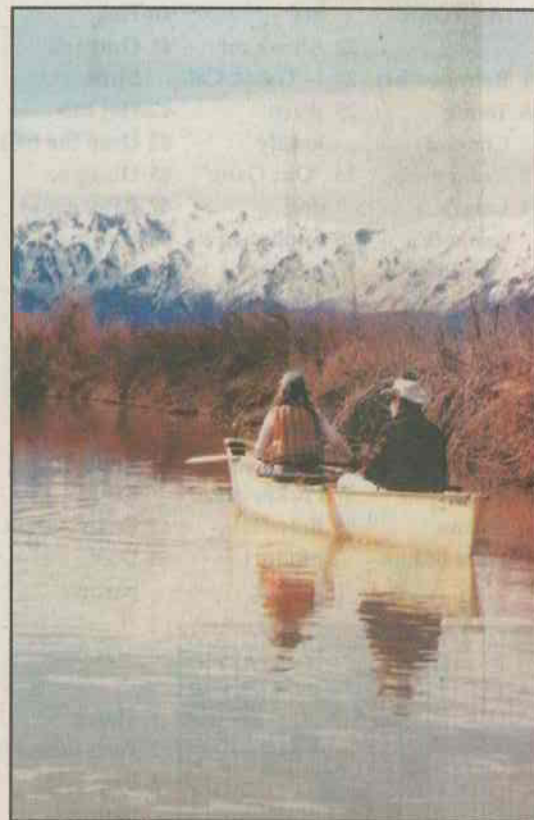
Fickle spring weather turned out to be on our side that morning, and the sun began to emerge from cloud cover as our flotilla pushed off and headed down river. We soon shed layers, broke out the binoculars.

As far as birding abilities go, I'd rank myself in the up-and-coming category. But that really didn't matter. Bryan and Jean and a few other more experienced members of the group were very willing to assist us in

identifying anything we came across. And we saw plenty.

Half-floating, half-paddling down the calm waters, we looked for bird life on the river, high in trees, and tucked inside the reeds. Maybe "looked" is too firm a word — more like encountered. Almost immediately we saw a harrier hovering out ahead, long-tailed and powerful. A second later, a kestrel clipped by, moving on sharp little wings.

We spied red-winged black-birds in the shrubs along the river. "Those birds scolding you," Bryan said with a smile, "are marsh wrens." I looked around and everyone else, from their own canoes, was trying to locate the bird of the moment. That's how it would go: all of us glancing around until someone would see something and then point it out to the rest, everyone quickly lifting their binoculars, homing in.



Mark R. Johnson/For The Herald Journal

Jean Lown and Bryan Dixon lead a group of birders on a recent outing on the Bear River.

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The river, a fairly wide, gravy-colored stretch of water, snaked back and forth as we alternated from paddling past tree-lined banks to open farmland.

In the distance, the snowy Wellsvilles kept returning as our backdrop, the canoes always gravitating in that southwest direction.

We came around a bend and a black-crowned night heron (to my untrained eye it appeared as a tern) flew overhead. And a red-tailed hawk, mid-meal on a branch, let us watch him yank on his catch for a while, occasionally flashing us a wild yellow eye. There were several double-crested cormorants in the river, and a downy woodpecker, bombed past us, landing nearby.

One of the birding highlights was a trio of sandhill cranes that erupted from the banks in front of us, beating away on impossibly long wings and making a throaty squawk that sounded like plastic being stretched.

There was plenty else to see, including geese, gulls, and ducks. We even saw a huge golden eagle occupying the better part of a small tree (OK, so maybe we saw that while driving to the put-in). Overall, I was astonished at the diversity of bird life in this sliver of habitat — and we only covered a small portion of the river.

Eventually we reached Cutler Reservoir and paddled into a breeze, soon arriving at the Benson Marina where we'd left our cars. Start to finish, the paddle covered about seven and a half miles, all of it on flat water, taking about two and half hours.

The Bridgerland Audubon Society offers many such

fieldtrips; another canoe outing is planned for April 29 (location TBA). To become a local Audubon member, to see a schedule of trips, or to learn more about Bear River and Cutler Marsh paddling opportunities, visit www.bridgerlandaudubon.org.

To boat this stretch of water, you can reach the Upper Bear River Recreation Area put-in by taking 2500 North to 2900 West. Here, head right and the Upper Bear River Recreation Area is on the right just before the bridge.

For the take-out, continue on across the bridge, bearing left at 3800 West and right at 3000 North. The Benson Marina will be on your right. Note: The paddling route is straightforward until close to the end. Look for a channel that cuts perpendicular, south, from the river and follow that to the Benson Marina.

Mark R. Johnson is a Logan-based freelance writer.