

# Windows to *Wildlife*



## *Epic Wildlife Watching: The Big Year*

Written by Wallace Keck\*

Park Superintendent, City of Rocks National Reserve & Park Manager, Castle Rocks State Park

Somewhere between bear jams at Yellowstone National Park, once-in-a-lifetime big game safaris in Africa, or ecotourism adventures to Central America, a much more watchable wildlife experience is possible – the Birding Big Year. And it is just as epic! Like so many birders before and beside me, I'm doing a big year.

Some readers might be familiar with the big year, having seen the 2011 movie of the same title, starring Steve Martin, Jack Black, and Owen Wilson. These comedic actors represented real-life characters who competed in the calendar year 1998 to see as many bird species in North America as possible. Sandy Komito won that competition with 748 species, a record that remained unbroken until 2013 when Massachusetts birder Neil Hayward topped it by one.

Big year birding is not birdwatching or merely listing birds one has observed. The essence of big year birding is competition, either with other birders or with oneself. Like all competitions, birding can be ruthless and fierce, all-consuming, and let's face it – expensive. I am a few months into my third big year in the last six, and consequently perpetually and happily broke. I've set a personal goal of seeing 300 species in the United States in 2016. This goal is a far cry from the current record, but it is respectable and within my financial reach. As far as competition, I am personally driven to set goals and achieve them, but a handful of my friends are also doing a big year, so naturally a competition (be it real or imagined) can be assumed.

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Chasing birds can be expensive. I've been socking away extra cash since last September. The costliest aspects of big year birding are fuel, oil changes, and probably a new set of tires before it's all over. There are only so many birds within the habitats of Southern Idaho, and while it is possible to see 300 species in the state, my best chances for success require travel to the vastly different eco-regions of the country. To date, I have seen 107 species within about a five-county area. As the spring migration begins and Idaho becomes inundated with species from Central and South America, I am sure to pick up another 120. But that still leaves me way short of the goal.

Since early December, I have been pouring over field guides, maps, state checklists, and the Internet for times, seasons, and occurrences of birds, especially those I have never seen before. New birds are called "lifers." I started the 2016 big year with 460 lifers to my credit – a feat that has taken over 30 years to achieve. Of the 300 species I intend to see this year, I am hoping that a dozen or more will include first time sightings (lifers).

Serious competitive birders do not simply bird by chance or serendipity, we study as if trying to pass the bar exam. I have spent countless hours digesting every piece of information about two target species that are located in the Edwards Plateau of Central Texas. I am determined to add Black-capped Vireo and Golden-cheeked Warbler to both my life list and big year list.

These two species (the Vireo and the Warbler) are the centerpieces of a 5,000-mile epic big year trip that will surely include many rare and unusual birds from the Great Basin, to the deserts of southeast Arizona, down the Rio Grande River, up the Texas Gulf Coast, through the piney woods of East Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas, beyond the Ozarks, over the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains, and finally the Colorado Plateau. Every birding big year should include at least one epic big year trip. However, unless I open a go-fund-me account, I will be birding fairly close to home the rest of the year.

I am well aware of the peer pressure to set a good example of environmental conservation and live a low carbon footprint life. On the other hand, big year



Mountain Bluebird © Wallace Keck

birding and traveling is as valuable as pursuing a college degree. The education one achieves through significant study and field experience will last a life-time. By December 31st, big year birders will have gained a deeper understanding of ecosystems in peril, effects of climate change, impacts of non-native species, the interplay between urbanization and agriculture, and the threats associated with fragmented habitat. Not to mention, birders greatly increase their knowledge of botany, geology, and geography, as well as diverse cultures and history. Upon my return from the “big trip” I will have something far more valuable than a list of birds. The knowledge and experiences gained will serve me well in serving the park visitors, school children, elected officials, and colleagues within my sphere of influence. I will be able to speak more fluently about the state of our environment and the importance of an individual conservation ethic. At the very least, I will have some great campfire stories.

Finally, big year birders gain something even greater than knowledge and influence, or personal satisfactions. Birding is ultimately about relationships and life-long friendships. Birders can be cranky loners at times, but we share a bond that breaks all stereo-types. I have birded with high school seniors and senior citizens, complete strangers and Christian brothers. I’ve never met a birder I didn’t like.

If you’re still a birdwatcher, consider stepping up your game. It’s not too late to start your own big year. Join in with a nearby Audubon chapter, or visit your parks and wildlife management areas to attend a bird walk. Better yet, participate in a citizen science project, backyard feeder watch, or Christmas bird count. But be careful, the leap from a bird walk to a big year obsession is shorter than you think. Soon you will be on your way to an epic watchable wildlife adventure.



*About the Author:* Wallace Keck is the park superintendent of City of Rocks National Reserve and park manager of Castle Rocks State Park in southern Cassia County. In addition to his obsession with birds, Wallace is an avid writer, public speaker, field botanist, and photographer, tirelessly promoting the parks. You can follow his 2016 birding big year at <https://wfkeck.wordpress.com/>



# Watchable Wildlife

## Wildlife Observation Platform at Fort Boise WMA

by Deniz Aygen\* and Bruce Ackerman\*, Idaho Dept. of Fish & Game- Boise

It's a thrilling site to see thousands of Snow Geese flying in and pouring into a small pond. Wave after wave of white geese silhouetted against the blue sky. They literally drop down out of the sky and come in for a tight landing on a crowded pond.

It is just as frustrating when you are unable to get a good view into those ponds. Fortunately viewing these geese has become easier because of a new wildlife observation platform at Fort Boise Wildlife Management Area Wildlife (WMA) in Parma. Thanks to a partnership between the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, the Idaho Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Golden Eagle Audubon Society, and Southwestern Idaho Birders Association, wildlife watchers are able now to get a much better view from fifteen feet up!

From mid-March through mid-April wildlife watchers are treated to the sights and sounds of Snow Geese and Greater White-Fronted Geese at Fort Boise WMA. The WMA is Idaho's most dependable location for these geese. In March, there can be up to 60,000 Snow Geese and 40,000 Greater White-fronted Geese. Snow geese fly out daily to feeding sites on private land away from the WMA. They fly out before dawn to feed, usually on corn stubble several miles away. They fly back at mid-day to their resting areas on the

WMA where hunting is not permitted this time of year. These geese spend their winters in central California, fly up to Idaho to refuel, and then continue to fly to their breeding grounds in the Canadian Arctic, the north slope of Alaska, or Wrangel Island in Russia!

Fort Boise WMA is located on the Idaho Birding Trail. With 175 sites located statewide, the trail represents a collection of bird watching hotspots, diverse habitats, and a glimpse of Idaho's rich natural heritage. With cottonwoods and willows lining the waterways and wetlands and artificial impoundments surrounded by cattail, bulrush, and sedges, the WMA was selected as an Important Bird Area because of its outstanding habitat value and the important role it plays in hosting birds.

To check out the new viewing platform for yourself, take a drive our to Fort Boise WMA. It's about a one-hour drive west of Boise.



Newly constructed wildlife observation platform at Ft. Boise WMA © IDFG/Tyler Archibald

# NONGAME WILDLIFE CONSERVATION FUND

Help conserve Idaho's wildlife and their habitats.

The Idaho Department of Fish and Game receives no state tax dollars and nongame wildlife receive no revenue from the sale of hunting and fishing licenses.

By making your tax-deductible contribution, you are helping to protect over 90% of Idaho's wildlife diversity as well as supporting important conservation education and watchable wildlife programs.

Do something wild and donate today!



Burrowing owl © Mike Morrison

## Donate Today!

Idaho Tax Form 40, Line 33

Check It and Protect It!

# Spring Wildlife Events

## Boise WaterShed

11818 West Joplin Rd., Boise; (208) 489-1284  
[www.cityofboise.org/Bee/WaterShed/Home/index.aspx](http://www.cityofboise.org/Bee/WaterShed/Home/index.aspx)

### April 16- WaterShed Weekend: Weather and Climate in Your Watershed

Between 10:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m., we'll dive into weather and climate science with hydrologists in our community. At 10:30, join Boise State University staff in the theater as they share data from weather research in our watershed. In the exhibit hall, visit with NOAA National Weather Service to see weather demonstrations! Create a mini tornado and participate in other weather experiments around the exhibit hall. Sponsored by the National Science Foundation. At 11:30, join us for a wastewater treatment plant tour (ages 4+, please). Closed-toe shoes are required for the tour. Free. No registration is required.

### May 21- WaterShed Weekend: Wetlands Bird Discovery Day

Celebrate our migratory bird visitors at Hyatt Hidden Lakes Reserve. Boise WaterShed is closed today. Participate in a spring bird count, plat a bird beak and next match game, learn the sights and sound of many avian species, and learn how to best help our feathered friends! Free. No registration is required. Held at Hyatt Hidden Lakes Reserve 5301 N. Maple Grove Road. Boise, ID 83714

## Foothills Learning Center

3188 Sunset Peak Rd., Boise; (208) 514-3755  
[www.cityofboise.org/Bee/Foothills/index.aspx](http://www.cityofboise.org/Bee/Foothills/index.aspx)

### April 6 - Birding Series with Terry Rich: Bird Song

9-10 a.m.; No pre-registration; free; please leave pets at home. Bird books and binoculars are available to borrow. Terry will share some tips to help you tell one bird from another by its song. He'll also have some suggestions about tools and resources that can help you become an avian musicologist!

### April 9 - Second Saturday Series: Raptors!

10 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.; No pre-registration; free; please leave pets at home. What are raptors doing in April? They are out hunting to feed their chicks! Join us as we learn about how much chicks eat and what makes raptors so special. Barb Forderhase, an environmental educator from the Bureau of Land Management, will be here with live bird presentations! We'll also be leading hikes to look for some of our resident raptors in the wild.

### April 13- Sunset Series: Climate and Our Changing Seasons

7-8:30 p.m.; No pre-registration; free; please leave pets at home. Join us to learn about phenology and climate change research. Phenology is the study of seasonal changes in plants and animals, and citizen science can help track these seasonal changes in relation to climate change. Caitlin Rushlow and Ben Soderquist, graduate students at Idaho State University and the University of Idaho, and current instructors at the McCall Outdoor Science School in McCall, will talk about research they have been doing both locally in the Owyhees south of Boise, and in the far north of Arctic Alaska.

### May 4 - Birding Series with Terry Rich: Bird Identification

8-9:30 a.m.; No pre-registration; free; please leave pets at home. Bird books and binoculars are available to borrow. Free! Time will be spent focusing on identifying the most common birds coming through Hulls' Gulch. There will be a short talk but most of the time will be spent outside birding.

### June 1 - Birding Series with Terry Rich: Bird Identification

8-9:30 a.m.; No pre-registration; free; please leave pets at home. Bird books and binoculars are available to borrow. Free! Time will be spent focusing on identifying the most common birds coming through Hulls' Gulch. There will be a short talk but most of the time will be spent outside birding.

APRIL 23RD 10AM - 4PM  
AT THE MK NATURE CENTER

# BIRDS BOISE

& NATIVE PLANT SALE



ILLUSTRATION BY REAGAN ALEXANDER  
3RD GRADE MULLAN TRAIL ELEMENTARY, POST FALLS

**CELEBRATING 100 YEARS OF BIRD CONSERVATION!**

**Free event, Family friendly, live birds  
Bird themed tables, activities, games and food trucks**



FRIENDS  OF MK NATURE CENTER

MK Nature Center 600 S. Walnut Street, Boise, ID 83712 208-334-2225

# News from the Field

## A Ring-tailed What?

by Ross Winton\*, Regional Wildlife Diversity Biologist, Idaho Dept. of Fish & Game- Magic Valley Region

**R**ing-tailed Cats are a species of small mammal rarely encountered in Idaho, until recently. They typically weigh less than 3.5 pounds and measure 24-34 inches from the nose to the tip of the tail. They are called ring-tails because their tails have alternating dark and light rings similar to a raccoon, but they are not a cat as their name suggests. They are a mesocarnivore, meaning their diet consists of 50-70% meat and is supplemented by fruits and seeds. They are often associated with steep rocky terrain, rock outcrops, and canyons, such as those found along the southern Idaho border, especially the City of Rocks. Ringtails are also known to be associated with juniper, which provides food, cover, and vertical structure.

A single record from 1967 in southeastern Idaho is the only historically known sighting and the lack of additional specimens or confirmed sightings resulted in their removal from Idaho's special status list in 1996. Until recently, ringtails had never been documented in south-central Idaho. A ringtail carcass was discovered just outside of Castle Rocks State Park in 2003, and tracks which were believed to be ringtail were discovered in 2005, and an additional observation was reported in City of Rocks in 2006.

A concerted effort was made in 2011 by IDFG Wildlife Biologist, Rob Lonsinger, to observe additional individuals in and around City of Rocks in an attempt to determine if a viable population existed in the area. No ringtails were observed but several other carnivores were photographed by remotely placed cameras.

Ring-tailed Cat © IDFG/Ross Winton





Ross Winton, biologist with IDFG, puts a collar on the first ring-tailed cat in Idaho. © IDFG/Kelton Hatch

collared individuals we may be able to establish some estimate with additional camera placements. Every observation helps increase our knowledge of this species so keep an eye out when you are enjoying the outdoors in southern Idaho, you may just spot the elusive Ring-tailed Cat!

In early spring 2014, a group of birders reported seeing a single ringtail at night along Rock Creek south of Twin Falls. This was the first observation in the south hills and it would not be the last for the Twin Falls area. Later in the spring of 2014, a Twin Falls area warehouse contacted Magic Valley Region IDFG staff about a ring-tailed cat that had been captured in a live box trap. The ringtail turned out to be a young female and staff began the discussion of what to do with the live animal.

IDFG staff had never had a ringtail live and in hand and due to staff having no knowledge of their distribution in Idaho decided to collar her and release her back in the south hills near where she was captured. IDFG staff doesn't normally have mesocarnivore collars sitting on a shelf for a situation like this so an old skunk collar was retrofitted with a sage grouse radio-transmitter and after a few hours the epoxy was set and we were ready to place the collar on her. With the help of a local veterinary office, she was anesthetized and the collar was placed. A short time later she was released in the south hills and for the next several months she was tracked and a great deal of new information was gleaned from her wanderings. She stayed within a 13 mile radius of her original release site until her transmitter battery died in early 2015. She stayed in her predicted canyon-like habitat and made several long distance movements over very short periods of time, quite impressive for such a small animal.

Almost a year later a second ringtail was encountered near Oakley on the roof of a home. IDFG staff responded to a call from the homeowner and within a few hours had it captured and an additional collar was created and deployed on this new ringtail, this time a male. The male was released at Big Cottonwood WMA near Oakley and was tracked for a very short period of time until for an unknown reason it stopped transmitting.

The presence of two Ring-tailed Cats in a small area of southern Idaho and in one year has led many to believe they are likely expanding their range north into Idaho from their historic distribution in the central and southern Great Basin. This is probably due to an increase in juniper overstory and a slow change in seasons that make conditions in southern Idaho more suitable to their presence. IDFG still does not know exactly how many ringtails call Idaho home, but with some knowledge of their habitat preference as a result of the



Watch a short video of a ringtail being fitted with a radio collar and released back to the wild:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mChVGpy87M&feature=youtu.be>

# Thank You for Your Support!



Greater Sage-Grouse © Mike Morrison

Thank you to those who made direct donations, purchased or renewed a wildlife license plate, or let us know of a tax check-off donation between January 1 - March 31, 2016.

Your contribution provides important funding for wildlife and habitat conservation in Idaho.



## Windows to Wildlife

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