



Newsletter of the Malheur Wildlife Associates, Friends of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge  
... Keeping the Needs of Wildlife First ...

Volume 4, Number 1

February 2007

### Malheur Wildlife Associates

*an affiliate of the National Wildlife Refuge Association*

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### What's Been Happening!

*Patty Bowers, Newsletter Editor*

Spring is again on its way. I just learned the first pintails of the season were spotted and many birders are eagerly looking forward to the "white" birds – snow geese, Ross's geese, and tundra swans. From now on, it's a steady progression of spring arrivals; anticipating what each new day will bring is part of the fun.

October's work party brought ten volunteers to Malheur Refuge where they spent two and a half days pruning and cleaning up the clone bed, completing a litter pickup along MWA's section of Highway 205 north of Frenchglen, and taking down fences no longer needed on the Refuge. Many thanks to all the volunteers who answered the call.

The interpretative panels along Highway 205 have been installed and provide a good place to learn about the importance of the Harney Basin to the Pacific Flyway. See the related article on page 2 and plan to stop by to learn more. Other interpretative projects are in progress. Coming soon are panels at The Narrows and along the Blitzen River.

The MWA Board of Directors met with Refuge staff in late November. Chad Karges, Assistant Project Leader, discussed the US Fish and Wildlife Service budget. Nationwide, the budget is flat, demonstrating a net loss and decreased spending power.

This situation opens many opportunities for MWA volunteers to assist with projects to help the Refuge meet its management goals. Additionally, we clarified alignment of the MWA purpose and goals with those of the Refuge in preparation for the Comprehensive Conservation Planning process beginning in 2010. (See bottom left sidebar for the updated purpose statement.) We also discussed ideas for recruiting new members for the organization and the Board.

The Malheur Wildlife Associates are planning projects and a special event to help build membership. See the related article, *A Special Invite*, and the accompanying flyer about MWA.

The 26<sup>th</sup> annual John Scharff Migratory Bird Festival and Art Show is scheduled for April 13–15, 2007. Check the details about this exciting event at [www.migratorybirdfestival.com](http://www.migratorybirdfestival.com) or call the Harney County Chamber of Commerce (541-573-2636). You don't want to miss this early spring gathering in the Harney Basin!

If you have not already renewed, your 2007 MWA dues are now payable. Paid members receive a twice-yearly newsletter, a 15% members-only discount at the Malheur Refuge Visitor's Center store, notices about work parties, and immense gratification in knowing you are supporting the Malheur Wildlife Associates purpose and goals on behalf of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. Visit soon.

The Malheur Wildlife Associates is an independent, non-profit 501(c)(3) corporation dedicated to assisting Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in its efforts to conserve, enhance and restore natural and cultural resources in the Harney Basin and environs; provide educational and wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities; enhance appreciation and knowledge of natural and cultural resources of the Refuge and related systems; and advocate for support of the Refuge and the National Wildlife Refuge system.

*Terri Grimm, Graphic Designer*

## Meet the staff – Carey Goss, Park Ranger

*Alice Elshoff, MWA Chair*

We are totally convinced that the biggest smile in the Fish and Wildlife Service belongs to Carey Goss. In addition to her many duties, Carey acts as liaison between the Malheur Wildlife Associates and the Refuge.

She grew up in the Bay area of California, and there were early indications that Carey might be headed for her eventual career. She and a girlfriend were frequent visitors to the local bird rehab center with yet another injured bird.

Carey graduated from Humboldt State University with a major in wildlife and a minor in fisheries. While there, she entered the SCEP (Student Career Experience Program), which provided her with experience working on refuges with diverse habitats and species: Ridgefield, with its rich cultural heritage, Humboldt Bay with ocean and estuary components, Ventura, with condor reintroductions, and

Sheldon/Hart Mountain, with desert species such as pronghorn and sage grouse. Perhaps it was that introduction to the wonders of the high desert that influenced her in 1998; Carey chose Malheur Refuge over other job possibilities.

Carey is in charge of the Public Use Program at Malheur Refuge. It may sound simple, but the program involves a complex of components. On refuge, it's seeing that refuge visitors have a quality experience. With the help of other refuge staff, she oversees all visitor facilities, which include appropriate parking areas, overlooks, trails, auto tour pullouts, signs, interpretive panels and a variety of brochures and printed materials to satisfy birders, photographers, hunters, anglers, researchers, families, school field trips, and tour groups.

She links the Refuge with the community through special events, educational outreach, exhibits and news releases. Carey still finds time to keep our group on track with Refuge goals and projects.



Photo: Patty Bowers

Carey Goss, Park Ranger at Malheur Refuge, is responsible for the Public Use Program, including acting as liaison with the Malheur Wildlife Associates.

Carey and husband Jeff live on a small acreage and are raising two lively boys, Bryce, 7, and Garrett, 2, with the help of three horses, two dogs, and one fish.



## Interpretative panels describe Harney Basin benefits

*Patty Bowers, MWA Board*

As early as 1993, talks began with a number of partners to highlight the importance of the Harney Basin to the Pacific Flyway. The project was

on again/off again for some time, but thanks to the efforts of Angela Sitz, former Refuge Operations Specialist, Carey Goss, Refuge Park Ranger, and Chad Karges, Refuge Assistant Project Leader, a long string of partners have produced a set of interpretative panels describing the link between the flood-irrigated native hay meadows in the

Harney Basin and the benefits they provide to migrating birds. Located along Highway 205, just south of the Eastern Oregon Agricultural Research Station, two of the panels describe how Harney Basin's wet meadows seasonally provide unique feeding and resting areas for many species of birds. The third panel details the role played by the Eastern Oregon Agricultural Research Station in research, education, and outreach to land owners, land managers, and the community.

The Ag Center pullout partners include the Oregon Department of Transportation (constructed the pullout), Eastern Oregon Agricultural Research Station, (panel, land space and moved fence for pullout), Harney County Court (paid for permit), Ducks Unlimited (dollars), Harney County Stockgrowers, Malheur Wildlife Associates, and Malheur National Wildlife Refuge (dollars and interpretation information).

Stop by the interpretative site and learn about these critical links.



Photo: Patty Bowers

Wayne Bowers learns how the seasonal cycle in the Harney Basin provides a critical link to bird migration along the Pacific Flyway.

## Adaptive Management: What is it and why should we care?

Alice Elshoff, MWA Chair

One of the biggest problems facing Malheur Refuge staff, as well as many land managers, is the invasion of noxious weeds. Research is ongoing, but there are no easy solutions. We do know that we cannot simply “spray our way” to a healthier landscape.

Refuge staff is working with scientists at the Eastern Oregon Agricultural Research Station to implement an adaptive management plan to address the problem.

### What is adaptive management and what is it not?

The concept is not new, having been suggested by Aldo Leopold when he said that the way to understand an ecosystem is to start restoring it. Adaptive management is a way to manage in the face of uncertainty and to learn by doing. It does not mean anything goes. It is a rigorous scientific process that begins with gathering the best available information. Management strategies are planned and conducted as experiments with a direct feedback loop between researchers and managers. Decisions can be modified as research provides new information about the system. The process proceeds slowly and carefully. Site-specific results are incorporated into the knowledge-base for a particular system to develop incremental-

## Wildlife Refuge Magazine Devoted to Refuge System

Adapted from news release by Ewan Hirsche, NWRA

The National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA) recently launched a new publication devoted entirely to generating visibility and support for the National Wildlife Refuge System.

*Wildlife Refuge* highlights the challenges, opportunities, and threats that the System and individual refuges face. It also showcases the diverse recreational opportunities found on refuges and features stories about the people and places that make the Refuge System unique among all the federal lands. It communicates with NWRA members and supporters

ly-improved management plans. As a result, true adaptive management is more than simply monitoring trends.

### Adaptive vs. traditional management

Traditional management has often meant managing a system for the “status quo,” providing predictable resources at some predetermined target level. Holding a site at a steady state to produce a consistent supply of resources often involves reducing the natural variability of that system. It is often based on techniques that have worked in the past, and results are measured by whether target numbers are attained. Negative responses to this management style may go unnoticed until large changes occur.

Adaptive management, in contrast, allows for systems that are naturally variable. The goal is not to maintain a static system but to create, or as is usually the case now, to recreate a dynamic and healthy system. Different techniques are applied over the site in different locations and controls are used. This approach allows for comparisons to see if effects are due to management or other factors, such as climate.

### How adaptive management is applied at Malheur Refuge

Management of wetlands in the past focused on maintaining the maximum amount of habitat by keeping as much water volume in the wetlands for as long as possible. This technique

about activities and accomplishments of the organization and ways members can take action and become involved in important refuge issues. It uses compelling images from refuges to remind readers of the majesty of these remarkable places.

Members of friends groups who are affiliates of the NWRA can now receive *Wildlife Refuge* magazine free of charge. The Malheur Wildlife Associates is an affiliate member of the NWRA.

If you are interested in receiving this magazine, contact Alice Elshoff (541-495-2322 or calice@highdesertair.com) by May 1. If responding to Alice by email, please put “Wildlife Refuge magazine” in the subject line. Provide a mailing address, phone number,

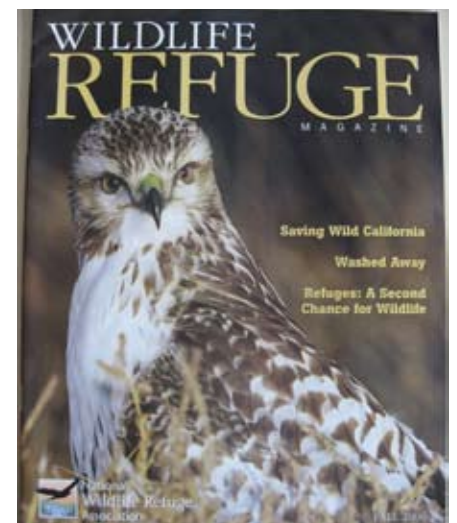


A balanced system, with a diverse plant community of grasses, forbs, and emergents like this location in the Island Field at Malheur Refuge, is the goal of adaptive management at Malheur Refuge.

has been at odds with normal wetland cycles of wet and dry seasons and has led to the enormous expansion of broadleaf cattail and hardstem bull-rush, thereby reducing the amount of quality habitat. The plan for Malheur Refuge involves manipulating water to mimic natural cycles, and testing many variables, such as burning, mowing, using pesticides, and applying different grazing schedules to see what techniques restore dynamism to the wetland systems and provide better interspersions of nesting cover to open water.

This article represents an interpretation of a twenty-page paper entitled *Viewpoint: Integrating Research and Management: Practical and Useful Adaptive Management* by Kimberly J. Reeve, Morghan, ecologist; Roger L. Shelley, weed scientist; and Tony Svejcar, research leader. Available from the Eastern Oregon Agricultural Research Center, USDA-ARS, 67826-A Hwy 205, Burns OR 97720.

and email address. *It is the policy of the NWRA and the MWA not to trade or sell group lists of names.*



## Pygmy rabbits – sagebrush specialists

Chris Carey, Wildlife Diversity Biologist, ODFW

One of the most unique rabbit species occurring in sagebrush habitats of the western states is the pygmy rabbit (*Brachylagus idahoensis*). A true sagebrush obligate, these small rabbits are limited in their distribution to areas of dense, big sage with well-drained, deep soils. Soil characteristics are important because pygmy rabbits are the only rabbit species in Oregon to dig their own burrows, which they use for maternal den sites and protection from predators and weather. Their diet consists primarily of sagebrush, with grasses and forbs in the summer months.

Pygmy rabbits are small, about 11 inches long and weighing just over a pound. They have short, rounded ears and a brownish-gray tail. Often confused with cottontail rabbits, pygmy rabbits do not have a white tail. An important diagnostic field characteristic is a buffy white edge around the entire ear, although this can be difficult to see on a moving rabbit. When flushed, pygmy rabbits use their small size and quick speed to out maneu-

ver potential predators. This species breeds from February through August and can have three or four litters of up to six young. They are reproductively mature as one-year-olds.

Once believed to be very common throughout the west, wildlife managers are concerned that changes to the sagebrush landscape from conversion to agricultural uses, range fires, livestock grazing, and high predator populations are having an impact on the abundance and distribution of pygmy rabbits. In Oregon, the rabbits are classified as a state sensitive species; at the Federal level they are a candidate for listing as a threatened species. In Washington State they are listed as an endangered species. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) considers them an “assessment” species, meaning they receive special management consideration.

Surveys are underway by Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), the BLM, and Oregon State University to find and map population centers of the pygmy rabbits in Harney, Lake, and Malheur counties. Oregon State University is conducting a radio telemetry study to determine annual survival and productivity, home range size, and habitat charac-

teristics. Preliminary results indicate some pygmy rabbits exist in home ranges as small as four to six acres. Some rabbits have surprised researchers by traveling up to six mile from birth areas to find new territories.

Pygmy rabbits are not known to occur on Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. Historical records exist for sites in the north Harney Basin. Some of those sites were lost during the high water years of the early 1980s. A small population is present in the Foster Flat area west of Malheur Refuge. Additional survey work planned for 2007 may find other populations.



One of the most unique rabbit species, the pygmy rabbit, makes its home in dense stands of big sagebrush.

## Local bird-sighting list available for Harney Basin

Laurie O'Conner, Harney County Library

There is now an “official” local bird-sighting list in Burns/Hines! Carey Goss, Park Ranger at Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, created an attractive easel with local birding information and list-space for bird sightings. The list resides at the Harney County Library, 80 West D Street in Burns. Laurie O'Conner will make regular calls to Malheur Refuge and to community bird watchers to update local sightings on the list at the library. Local and visiting birders are encouraged to take advantage of this new resource to note which species are currently in the area and to add their “finds.” The library is prepared to expand birding resources at the library as the need is demonstrated.

Patty Bowers and Rick Vetter compiled a bird list from more than 10 years of bird observations in the Harney Basin during the John Scharff



Laurie O'Conner and Carey Goss provide a local bird sighting list at the Harney County Library.

Migratory Bird Festival. The list is found on the “bird list available” link at <http://www.migratorybirdfestival.com/Registration.htm>. The festival traditionally occurs during the first or second weekend of April. Sources include high listing tours, “Bird Central” postings, and other participant sightings during the weekend. The combination may vary, but a good representation of these 167 species is seen each year. Weather is the predominant factor affecting the presence of a particular bird species. Visit a variety of habitats to see more species. Habitats include the Silvies River floodplain, sewage ponds, streams and other ponds, grassy fields, weed patches, sagebrush, juniper woodlands, forest, and local feeders.

If you have questions, contact Laurie ([harneylo@highdesertair.com](mailto:harneylo@highdesertair.com) or 541-493-2608).

## Snows in summer, Harney County's snowy plovers

Wayne Bowers, MWA member

Snowy plovers are small “peeps” that are sometimes difficult to locate as heat shimmers dance on the high desert playas. Is it a mirage, snowy plover, killdeer, or avocet? Sometimes they are relatively easy to spot as they scurry along the edge of the playa water searching for brine flies and other aquatic creatures. Unless startled, they are almost impossible to spot when nesting. Their white, gray-brown, and black plumage blends in very well with the light alkali soils, small stones and bits of litter on the playas of their summer homes – Harney Lake, Alvord Desert, Alvord Lake, Mickey Basin, and Borax Lake. Their soft “kuwheet” or “toWEoo” call is often the first indication of their presence.

My wife, Patty, and I were fortunate to help the Burns District Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) gather additional information about inland populations of snowy plovers that call the high desert playas of Southeast Oregon home during the summer. The project's goal was to build on information gathered by Mark Stern et al, 1990 in a report titled *Distribution, Abundance and Movements of Snowy Plovers in Southeast Oregon*. Our specific task was to look at six

of the areas covered in that report (Alvord Desert, Alvord Lake, Borax Lake, Mickey Basin & Hot Springs, Pueblo Slough, Tum Tum Lake) over three years, 2004–06. Each area was surveyed several times from late May through mid-July. In addition, we helped ODFW and Malheur Refuge with an annual inventory of Harney Lake in 2005.

The surveys occurred during periods of wildly different precipitation years. In 2004, precipitation was far below average and followed several years of below-average precipitation. The years 2005–06 were above average, with 2006 well above average. As a result, we observed how the plovers adapted to different precipitation patterns and water levels on the playas. After all, snowy plovers have successfully adapted over many generations to fluctuating high-desert weather extremes.

In 2004, the only water on the Alvord Desert was a wet area of less than five acres – where the outflow of Alvord Hot Springs evaporated on the playa and a small, wet area near the northwest corner of the playa where the remnants of several small streams draining the east side of Steens Mountain seep out. In contrast, during 2006 water covered several thousand acres, spreading over several square miles of the Alvord Desert. In

2004, when water was scarce, plovers were concentrated in the vicinity of Alvord Hot Springs and successfully raised broods. In 2006, when there was little nesting habitat available in the vicinity of the hot springs, very few birds raised young or spent time there. Instead, they were scattered sparsely around the south and east margins of the large water body on the playa. Those successfully nesting on the east side of the water were those whose nests were located as far as a half-mile east of the water. Any nests found closer to the eastern water edge were flooded as the prevailing westerly storms pushed the water across the playa like a giant squeegee.

Snowy plovers begin arriving on the playas in mid- to late-May, with the first chicks usually seen during the first week of June. Numbers of adult birds were at their highest from mid-June to mid-July, and newly hatched chicks were observed as late as July 19, the latest survey date.

The birds seem to prefer playas that have a dependable water source, even if it's meager in years of low precipitation. No birds were found at Tum Tum Lake, Pueblo Slough, or several other scattered smaller playas east of Steens Mountain.

The nesting plovers share the playas with willets, American avocets, long-billed curlews, Wilson's phalaropes, killdeer, and occasional black-necked stilts, as well as gulls and several species of waterfowl, depending on water conditions. It's common to see family groups of avocets, killdeer, and snowy plovers foraging together in the same area. A total of about seventy bird species were observed during the surveys over the three-year period.

By mid-July, snowy plovers are joined by other migrating shorebirds including western sandpiper, least sandpiper, and Baird's sandpiper. Sometime after mid-summer, the “snows of summer” head south to warmer climes, leaving the playas to the cold snows of winter.



Photo: Wayne & Patty Bowers

A snowy plover chick freezes at the first sign of danger.

## Interior United States snowy plover population survey

Charlie Bruce, Threatened and Endangered Species Coordinator, ODFW

In 1989, the State of Oregon listed the western snowy plover as threatened statewide, although the area of primary concern is the Oregon coast where only about 160 birds survive with intense management. In 1993, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) listed the Pacific coast population from Washington State to Mexico as threatened. A recent status review of the species on the Pacific coast confirmed the need to look at the status of the species across its entire range in the US and Mexico.

During May and June 2007, the USFWS and US Geological Survey will coordinate surveys of interior and coastal nesting snowy plover populations in 12 states, including Oregon. The overall objective is to estimate the breeding population among all the states while documenting their distribution and abundance. In Eastern Oregon, periodic trend surveys have occurred over many years and have identified key nesting areas at Harney, Abert, and Summer lakes along with smaller numbers at other locations. While interior Oregon nesting areas are fairly secure, interior birds migrate and winter on the California and Mexican coasts where human disturbance is a major concern.



Photo: Wayne & Patty Bowers

Snowy plovers easily blend into the light alkali soils of the desert playas.



## John Scharff Migratory Bird Festival and Art Show

**April 13-15, 2007**

Spend an amazing weekend witnessing the spectacular spring migration in the Harney Basin of Southeast Oregon. View thousands of migratory birds as they rest and feed in the wide open spaces of Oregon's high desert. From waterfowl to shorebirds, cranes to raptors, wading birds to songbirds, you'll see it all!

This 26th annual festival offers non-stop birding activities as well as historical and cultural information sure to entertain you and your family. So whether you're a beginner or a life-long wildlife enthusiast, the festival has something for everyone. Don't miss this extraordinary weekend.

Registration begins February 5th. You must register by calling the Harney County Chamber of Commerce (541-573-2636) or going online to [www.migratorybirdfestival.com](http://www.migratorybirdfestival.com). MasterCard and Visa are accepted. If you register by telephone, you may also pay by check. You must be registered to participate in workshops and tours. Space is limited and tours fill fast, so contact the Harney County Chamber of Commerce right away if you plan to attend. The Friday evening program, art exhibits, booths, and displays in the high school gymnasium are open to the public at no cost.

Sandhill Crane commemorative posters and T-shirts featuring the art of Rene Eisenbart (see left and on the Web site) are available for purchase.

# A Special Invite

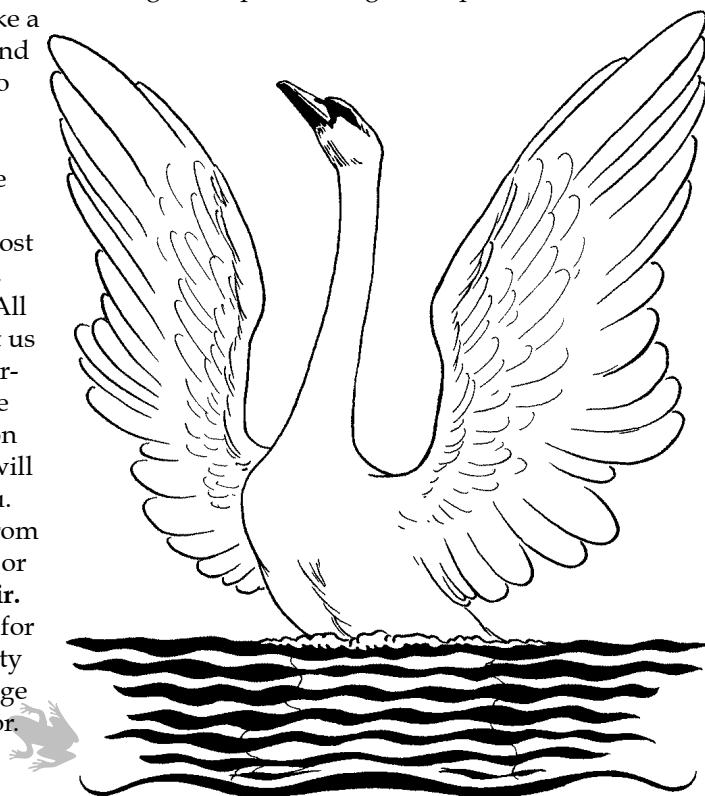
Alice Elshoff, MWA Chair

We are pleased with everything the Malheur Wildlife Associates have accomplished during the last several years, but we could do much more with the addition of a few active members.

With that in mind, we are planning a "happening" at Malheur Refuge on Saturday, May 5, 2007. Current and prospective members are invited to a delightful brunch, where you will hear about future plans and projects. Brunch will be followed by staff-guided tours. Choose a birding tour, learn about archeological and historic sites, or visit restoration projects. "Behind locked gate" tours to places on the Refuge not open to the general public will also be available. We'll make a fun-filled day of it and we're inviting you to join in.

Some overnight accommodations are available for out-of-towners. And, the cost for the event is zero, zip, nada, nothing! All you need to do is let us know if you are interested and a brochure and special invitation with all the details will be in the mail to you.

So, let us hear from you at 541-495-2322 or [calice@highdesertair.com](mailto:calice@highdesertair.com). Plan to join us for this great opportunity to see Malheur Refuge in its spring splendor.



## Duck stamps benefit wildlife

Alice Elshoff, MWA Chair

All waterfowl hunters age 16 and older are required to purchase and carry the current Migratory Bird Conservation and Hunting Stamp, but conservationists, stamp collectors, and others also purchase the stamp in support of habitat conservation. Ninety-eight percent of the proceeds from the \$15 duck stamp go into the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund, which purchases wetlands for the National Wildlife Refuge System.

A current duck stamp is also good for free admission to any refuge open to the public. Duck stamp dollars have been used to acquire land at hundreds of refuges in nearly every state in the nation.

Duck stamps are available at post offices, national wildlife refuges, some national retail chain stores, and various sporting-goods stores nationwide. Because of the important role stamp proceeds play in conserving vital refuge wildlife habitat, the National Wildlife Refuge Association strongly encourages all refuge enthusiasts – hunters or otherwise – to buy the stamp!



Duck stamp proceeds play an important role in conserving wildlife habitat at refuges across the country.



## Membership Form

2007

Annual dues:

- \$10 Individual
- \$20 Family
- \$50 Donor
- \$200 Patron
- \$500 Life Member

I prefer to receive my newsletter by:

- Snail Mail
- Email

Type of Membership:

- New
- Renewal

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Last First Middle I.

Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_  
City State Zip Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Mail this form with check to: Malheur Wildlife Associates  
36391 Sod House Lane  
Princeton, OR 97721

I am interested in hearing about work parties via email. Please add my email address to the project notification list.

## New staff arriving at Malheur Refuge

Carey Goss, Refuge Liaison

Donna Stovall, Refuge Manager, recently announced the addition of two new staff members at Malheur Refuge. Shane Theall will fill the Fire Management Officer (FMO) position that has been open since 2004. Edward Gheen will assume the position of BAER (Burned Area Emergency Recovery) resource specialist to implement the Emergency Stabilization Plan on refuge lands that were affected by last summer's wildfire.

Since 1997, Theall was the Supervisory Range Technician for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Snake River and Ontario Guard Stations in Vale, OR. Prior to his position in Vale, he was stationed at his hometown of Lakeview at the BLM office, starting in 1990.

Gheen is a retired BLM employee and currently lives in Ontario, OR. While working for BLM in Boise, ID, he was the Lead Range Conservationist and also served as the Wildlife Biologist. Since his retirement, Gheen has worked for Oregon State Uni-

versity as the seed certification field inspector and more recently for the Malheur County SWCD as the Watershed Technical Specialist.

Stovall also highlighted the work accomplishments and efforts of Fire Crew Leaders, Katie and Martin Jannette, during the period without a Fire Management Officer.



*"We need another wiser and perhaps more mystical concept of animals. We patronize them for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate of having taken form so far below ourselves. And therein we err greatly. In a world older and more complete than ours they move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendor and travail of life." Henry Beston 1928*

**National Wildlife Refuges: Wildlife's Best Friend**  
National wildlife refuges are places in the United States where wild creatures can get what they need to live—food, water, shelter, and space. On national wildlife refuges, the needs of wildlife come first.



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This newsletter is published biannually by the Malheur Wildlife Associates for the benefit of its members. Copies are also made available to refuge visitors and through various other outlets.

### Here's What's Inside ...

What's Been Happening . . . . .	1
Meet The Staff - Carey Goss . . . . .	2
Interpretative panels . . . . .	2
Adaptive management . . . . .	3
Wildlife Refuge magazine . . . . .	3
Pygmy rabbits—sagebrush specialists . . . . .	4
Local bird-sighting list available . . . . .	4
Snows in summer . . . . .	5
Interior US snowy plover survey . . . . .	6
John Scharff Migratory Bird Festival . . . . .	6
A special invite . . . . .	7
Duck stamps benefit wildlife . . . . .	7
New staff arriving at Malheur Refuge . . . . .	8

