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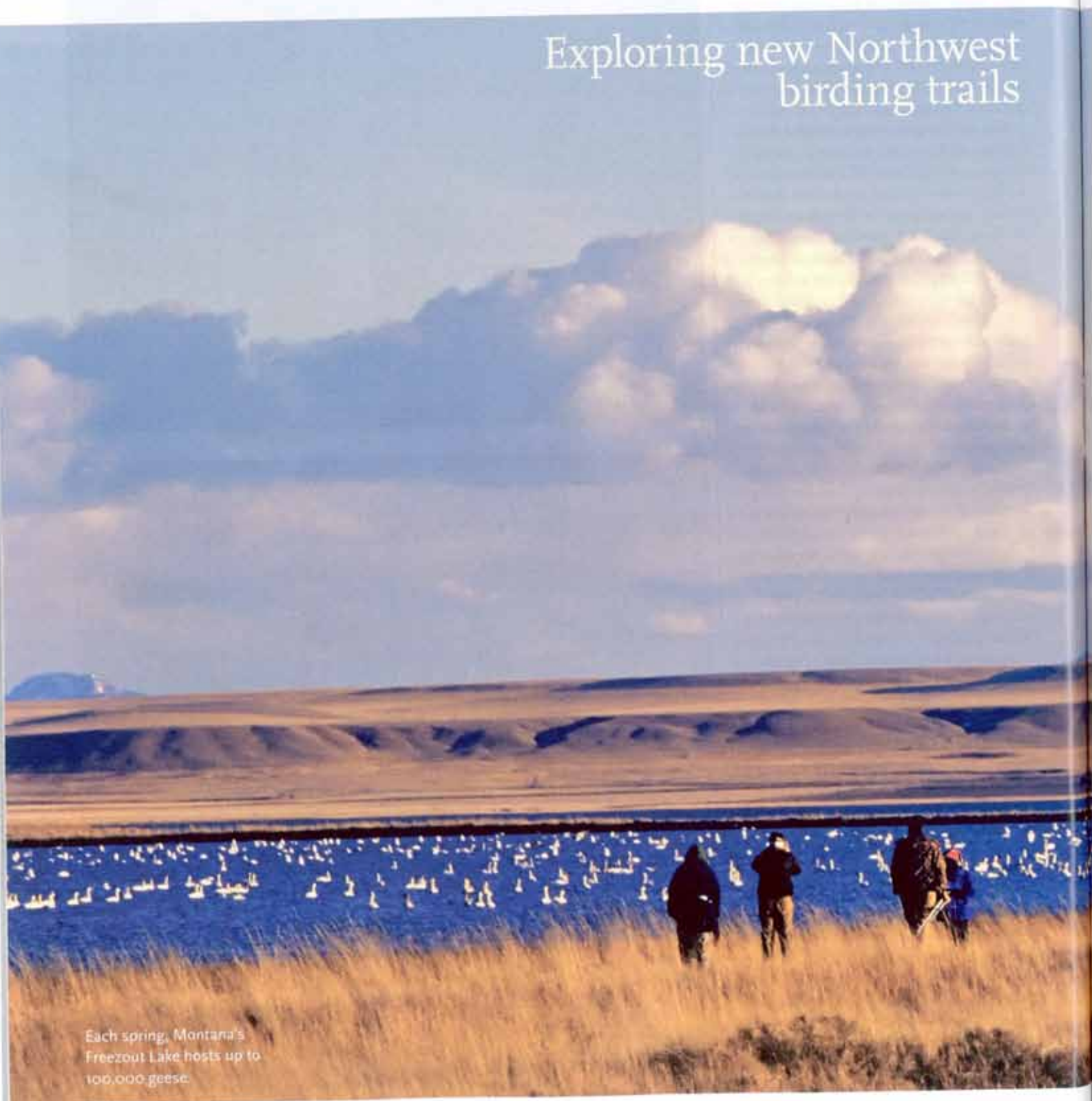
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Cover: Grand Canyon river rafters explore ancient ruins. The Grand Canyon is less than 100 miles from Flagstaff, Arizona. Photo by Kerrick James.

Bird Walks

Exploring new Northwest
birding trails



Each spring, Montana's
Freezout Lake hosts up to
100,000 geese.



THE TOPS OF THE HILLS barely show in silhouette as my friends and I drive toward the Henrys Lake region of eastern Idaho, just 85 miles northeast of Idaho Falls. But then the sun starts to rise, and early-morning glow colors the hills and trees in rich, warm reds. Local birds start their day, singing and beginning to move among the branches. When we stop to stretch our legs, we hear robins in tall roadside treetops. A red-tailed hawk circles high in the sky.

It's an auspicious start to the day, because we're bird-watchers—aka "birders"—which means that we're interested in observing birds and their behaviors. Becoming a birder is often a gradual process. It can start simply; you may wonder what a particular bird is and get an identification book to find out. Binoculars come next. Soon you're traveling—across the region, the nation, even the world—to satisfy your passion to see new and different birds. And you have plenty of company: According to the U.S. Forest Service, birding is the nation's fastest-growing outdoor activity. More than 46 million people participated in this recreational pursuit in 2006, generating \$32 billion in birding-related sales that year.

Communities across the country are increasingly putting out the welcome mat for birders, and the Northwest states of Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington have all established official birding trails over the last few years, making it easy for birders to plan a trip that showcases each state's spec-

By Brian H. Bell

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tacular natural beauty and impressive birdlife.

Below are just a few examples of the wonders to be found on these trails, from which you might spot a rare great gray owl (in the *Harry Potter* books, the Weasley family's owl Errol is a great gray); coastal birds such as the chestnut-backed chickadee, which builds its nest with animal fur; hundreds of majestic bald eagles; and migratory birds—such as the whirlpool-creating phalarope—that stop for rest and refreshment at a scenic lake.

Idaho: Owl Search

Some bird species are more eagerly sought than others to add to a birder's "life list"—a record of the first time and place you see each type of bird—because they are rare or difficult to find. The great gray owl, a resident of the deep northern forests, is one of those magical birds.

Idaho is one of the best places in the Lower 48 to see the great gray owl, a reclusive bird that during the day prefers to hide in branches for shade or for protection from predators such as hawks, and usually does its hunting at night. Although the great gray is not considered threatened, its numbers are thought to be very low. Partners in Flight, an international network of biologists and bird experts, estimates that there are roughly only 30,000 in all of North America, and 60,000 worldwide.

The great gray is North America's largest owl, with a body length of more than 2 feet and a wingspread more than 4 feet across. Only two or three other owls in the world are larger (the biggest is the Eurasian eagle owl, found throughout Europe and Asia). Much of the great gray owl's size is fluff and feathers—including chest and side feathers that help keep the owl warm—and an adult bird weighs only about 2 pounds.

The fascinating great gray has an upper body with what the Website owling.com describes as "a white mustache and black bow tie," along with a bare patch under each of its wings to help cool it during hot weather, and such excellent hearing that it can locate prey—usually rodents such as squirrels, voles, mice and gophers—beneath 2 feet of snow in the dark.

Great grays don't build nests but, rather, take over the abandoned nests of other birds, such as red-tailed hawks and northern goshawks. This saves on labor, but a disadvantage is that the used nests are often a bit unstable and in danger of disintegrating, which means eggs or nestlings could fall through.

When great grays are courting, the male brings food to the female, and continues to feed her while she lays her white eggs—one to nine of them, with the number apparently related to the abundance or scarcity of prey—and incubates them for about 30 days. Owl couples fiercely defend the nest from predators such as ravens and red-tailed hawks. Participants in a six-year study of great grays in north-eastern Oregon even watched a female attack a coyote that got too close.



HOWIE GAMBER / IDAHOSTOCKIMAGES.COM

After the young hatch, which takes place in the same order as the eggs were laid, the female eats the eggshells. The male also feeds the young after they hatch. As the demand for food increases, the male may broaden his hunting time to include early daylight or early evening, increasing a birder's chances of spotting him.

The youngsters leave the nest after about a month, but because they can't fly for a couple more weeks, they hop to perches close to the nest, such as trees leaning against the nest tree. Interestingly, wildlife biologists Evelyn Bull and Mark Henjum, who oversaw the Oregon study, observed parents paying special attention to the weakest fledglings. "One of the three young that had just left the nest was blind in one eye and very uncoordinated," they wrote in the report of their study. "The female stayed nearest the blind owlet, and the male fed it more frequently than the others."

A prime spot to see these amazing birds is the Henrys Lake area, which is stop No. 47 in the "Southeast" section of the Idaho Birding Trail, one of four sections delineated in the state's birding-route guide.

When we arrive at the Henrys Lake area on our late-June trip, it is still early morning, and there is lots of bird activity. Along the Henrys Fork River, red-necked grebes and red-breasted mergansers are in their rust-colored breeding plumage—the mergansers also sporting green heads—and yellow-headed blackbirds sing from the cattails. Swooping

The great gray owl is the largest owl in North America, and has a wingspan of more than 4 feet.



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over the meadows, northern harriers perform their arcing courtship-flight displays.

At dusk and dawn, Red Rocks Road, running west past the Henrys Lake Recreation Area, is a good place to spot a great gray owl. I carefully scan the Douglas fir and grand fir trees around me, watching for a gray that might be perched there to intently listen and watch for prey before noiselessly gliding down after a gopher or vole. The owl's glide is completely silent because of its feather structure—the feathers taper toward the trailing edge like airplane wings, creating excellent aerodynamics—and the bird usually is on its prey before the prey hears it.

I also look for broken treetops, where great gray owls often like to nest, and note a promising one ahead: a ponderosa pine, around 25 feet tall. Success! I see fluffy young owlets in a nest, their rounded heads popping up above the ragged treetop, and an adult perched atop a snag nearby. As I wait quietly in hopes of watching the adult bring food to the owlets, I see the other parent, alert for predators, perched on the limb of a nearby tree.

Coming across an entire family group for such an eagerly sought bird as the great gray owl is a wonderful accomplishment for the day.

Idaho's "Southeast" birding section, the one on which I've spotted the great gray owl family, has 47 stops. The state Birding Trail also includes a "North" section with 59 sites, a "Southwest" section with 40 sites and an "East-Central" section with 27 sites.

Washington: Coastal Drama

The far northwestern corner of the Olympic Peninsula, just a day trip from Seattle in my home state of Washington, has some of the most dramatic scenery you'll ever see. Cliffs, rocky shorelines, offshore islands, lush green rain forest, and a spectacular diversity of arboreal and ocean birds make this area particularly appealing to the birder.

It's August, and I'm headed to Cape Flattery, the northwesternmost tip of the Lower 48 states, which is site No. 23 on the Olympic Loop of the Great Washington State Birding Trail. The cape is on the Makah Indian Reservation, so I pick up the required recreation pass at the Makah Cultural and Research Center in Neah Bay. I then drive seven miles through dense temperate rain forest out to the three-quarter-mile Cape Flattery Trail, which leads down to the cape.

On the boardwalk trail, I look and listen carefully for Steller's jays, Swainson's and varied thrushes,



Above: A sooty shearwater follows a 40,000-mile migration route that crosses the Pacific, from New Zealand to South America to the Northwest.



Left: Chestnut-backed chickadees line their nests with fur from animals such as rabbits and deer.

and winter wrens, and delight in a roaming flock of chestnut-backed chickadees that feed on insects in front of me. These small, active, nonmigratory birds are 4 to 5 inches tall and weigh less than half an ounce. They make their nests in holes such as tree cavities, and often line the nests with moss or grass, as well as fur. The chestnut-backs collect fur hair from rabbits, coyotes, deer and even cats, horses and cows, and cover their eggs with fur when they leave the nest.

As I gaze at the chickadees, the high, fluting call of

the varied thrush catches my attention. It seems to come from no definite place, which makes it hard to locate this bird, which is known for being able to "throw" its voice like a ventriloquist. Even during rainfall, the varied thrush fills the forest with a strong, rich song that has been described as both enchanting and haunting.

Partway down the trail, a winter wren also launches into full song. I am amazed that this tiny, 4-inch-long brown bird is capable of such a loud sound. The song has multiple phrases and lasts for more than 30 seconds. A brief silence, and then the wren rings out again.

At the end of the trail, from one of the boardwalk's four overlooks high above the Pacific Ocean, I see tufted puffins, pigeon guillemots, rhinoceros auklets and common murrelets, which are all diving,

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GREG GILLSON / THEBIRGUIDE.COM

Up to 300 bald eagles make their winter home in Southern Oregon's Bear Valley National Wildlife Refuge, which is the largest bald-eagle roost in the Lower 48.

fish-hunting birds about the size of a crow. They're attracted here by currents flowing past the cape that bring up nutrients and thus attract a great variety of fish. When diving for this bounty of fish, all of these birds can go as deep as several hundred feet or more.

The charcoal-hued puffin is much sought after by bird watchers, and is striking this time of year, with a black body and a big head with long yellowish feathers on top. Its white face sports a large, bright-red-and-yellow bill.

Tatoosh Island, about a mile offshore, is home to a large colony of common murres, which are constantly hassled by bald eagles that cause the murres to dive off the cliffs into the ocean. The murres soon return to their posts, but some researchers say this harassment is affecting their breeding success, although the bird is not thought to be threatened. Tatoosh is a private island owned by the Makah tribe, so there are no tours to it, but I can see it clearly from my viewing platform.

Closer in, just above the ocean waves, I spot a sooty shearwater, a dark, foot-and-a-half-long bird normally found farther out to sea. It glides past, using the wind currents to bank and turn, occasionally touching down to try for a fish. From November to January, the sooty shearwater breeds by the millions around New Zealand, following a 40,000-mile round-trip migratory track that brings it east to South America and then north to Washington and other places in the North Pacific in April or May.

I'm further enthralled when a peregrine falcon rockets past me and perches on a snag on an offshore sea stack. These birds

Puzzle on page 104.



PUZZLE © 2008 PENNY PRESS, INC.



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have made a good comeback since their 1970 inclusion on the U.S. Endangered Species list, soaring off the list in 1999.

The 54-stop Olympic Loop is one of four established routes on the Great Washington State Birding Trail, which also features the Cascade Loop (68 sites), the Coulee Corridor in Eastern Washington (53 sites) and the Southwest Loop (54 sites). Three more routes are in the works: Southeast and northeast loops are planned for late 2008 and mid-2009, respectively, and a loop throughout Puget Sound is anticipated in 2010.

Oregon: Winter Eagle Watch

The Klamath Basin in south-central Oregon is the winter home for more than 500 bald eagles, up to 300 of which roost in Bear Valley National Wildlife Refuge, 20 miles southwest of Klamath Falls, making the refuge the largest bald-eagle roost in the Lower 48 states. That's why I'm standing in the cold and dark, just before dawn, in early February at the mouth of the valley. I'm awaiting the daily sunrise "flyout," when the eagles leave their nighttime roosts in the Bear Valley refuge and other nearby refuges and soar south and east to start a day of feeding in area marshes and farm fields.

The Bear Valley NWR area is site No. 34 on the 47-stop Klamath Basin Birding Trail, one of four completed routes in the Oregon Birding Trails network. While the 4,200-acre refuge itself is not open to the public, there are great viewing spots near the east end of the refuge, and on driving tours of nearby refuges such as Tule Lake and Lower Klamath, which like Bear Valley are part of the six-refuge Klamath Basin National Wildlife Refuge Complex. The Lower Klamath NWR was the first waterfowl refuge in the country and is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year.

Many birders consider the Klamath Basin area to be one of the best bird-watching sites in the country because of the large number and variety of birds present at all times of the year.

Waterfowl begin to migrate to the Klamath Basin in early September, when northern pintails and greater white-fronted geese arrive. By mid-November, more than 1 million birds may be in the basin, including tundra swans and American wigeons.

While those birds are arriving, birds that came in the spring, such as white pelicans—whose three Klamath Basin breeding colonies are among the few remaining breeding colonies in the American West—



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and white-faced ibises are preparing to leave, and will be gone by late October.

In December, many species of raptors arrive, including northern harriers, red-tailed hawks, rough-legged hawks and golden eagles. To me, though, the major attraction is the winter-dwelling bald eagles, which are an impressive sight with their snow-white head and tail, and a wingspan of 6 feet or more.

I'm closely watching the hills inside the refuge, which rise 1,600 feet and are slightly visible against the barely brightening sky. My excitement grows as dawn comes up and I anticipate the first eagle. Then I see it, a large bird with broad rounded wings, and a huge head with a hooked, yellow beak. This eagle is quickly joined by others, and we watch the growing numbers of eagles as they fly 10 to 15 miles to the distant wetlands of the Tule Lake and Lower Klamath refuges, where they will feed on weakened or injured waterfowl such as ducks. After feasting in the Klamath Basin to build their energy for the coming breeding season, the eagles will return to their distant nest sites, as far away as Alaska and Western Canada.

The Klamath Basin trail is one of four completed trails in Oregon. The others are the Basin & Range Birding Trail, in Southern Oregon and Northeast California (36 sites on three loops), the Cascades Birding Trail (184 sites in four sections), and the Oregon Coast Trail (173 sites on five loops). A fifth trail, in the Willamette Valley, is being developed and should be completed in 2009, and four more trails have been proposed in Eastern Oregon and the South Cascades.

Montana: Rite of Spring

I arrive at Freezout Lake near dawn in mid-April, ready for a show.

In the spring, this 11,000-acre open-water and marshland complex hosts up to 100,000 geese—snow geese and Ross' geese, both species gleaming bright white with black wingtips—that arrive from late March to mid-April.

They are joined by a great variety of ducks and shorebirds: This morning I see a rare Eurasian wigeon, with its gray sides and reddish head, and an upland sandpiper with its short bill, slim neck and long, thin legs, both stopping to refuel for their journey to Canadian breeding grounds.

Freezout Lake is about 40 miles west of Great Falls, on the 12-site Russell Country Birding Trail in north-central Montana, one of the state's five birding trails.



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I stand on the lake's eastern shore, with the new day's sun behind me, as the birds awaken. They chatter and mutter, with the calls and squawks reaching a cacophony. Early-morning light makes the colors and textures of the feathers stand out on the green-winged teals and red-breasted mergansers. As the birds paddle about, the ripple patterns they create on the water reflect the changing sunlight. Mallards' green heads flash fluorescent in the sun.

Migrating shorebirds begin coming to Freezout in mid-April from as far south as South America. This morning I spot long-billed dowitchers, greater and lesser yellowlegs and plenty of "peeps"—tiny sandpipers with high-pitched calls, such as sanderlings, least sandpipers, and semipalmated sandpipers. They are soon joined by Baird's and pectoral sandpipers, Wilson's snipes and red-necked phalaropes. The shorebirds search the mudflats and probe for small insects living in, and on, the mud.

The dowitchers probe the mud with their bills in a sewing-machinelike motion. The bills are 4 inches to 5 inches long and very sensitive and flexible at the tip, and the dowitchers are able to independently move just the tip of their bill as they pick up tasty tidbits.

The phalaropes spin tightly in place, stirring the mud and creating a whirlpool that causes insects and other organisms to rise within reach. The female phalaropes compete for males and nesting sites instead of the other way around, and after the female lays her eggs she departs, leaving the male to do all the incubation and raise the young. I love to watch them in spring and summer, when the dull gray or brown coloring of their fall southbound migration to Central America is enlivened by red markings around the necks of both males and females.

However, the most dramatic show at the lake occurs when a bald eagle, Swainson's hawk or falcon makes a pass. As the bird of prey passes over, the sky becomes filled with thousands of waterbirds and shorebirds taking to the air for safety. The flocks wheel about, with tight groups turning and changing direction instantaneously, making it difficult for the raptor to zero in on a particular bird.

Montana birding trails also include the Missoula Valley Birding and Nature Trail (14 sites); the Bitterroot Trail, along the Idaho border (25 sites); the Custer Country Southeastern Montana Birding Trail (15 sites); and the Northeastern Plains Birding Trail (12 sites, including two across the Canadian border in Saskatchewan).




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Brian H. Bell is a professional birding and natural-history guide who leads trips for Seattle Audubon and Eastside Audubon. He is also a former president of the Washington Ornithological Society, for whom he also

leads field trips, and is the author of Birds of Washington State.

Horizon Air (800-547-9308, www.horizonair.com) flies daily to cities that are gateways to great birding destinations across the Northwest. For more information on the region's birding trails and to request brochures, visit www.fishandgame.idaho.gov/ifwis/ibt (Idaho); www.russell.visitmt.com/birding, www.montanabirdingtrail.org or www.custer.visitmt.com/birdingtrail.html (Montana); www.oregonbirdingtrails.org (Oregon); or www.wa.audubon.org/birds_GreatWABirdingTrail.html (Washington).




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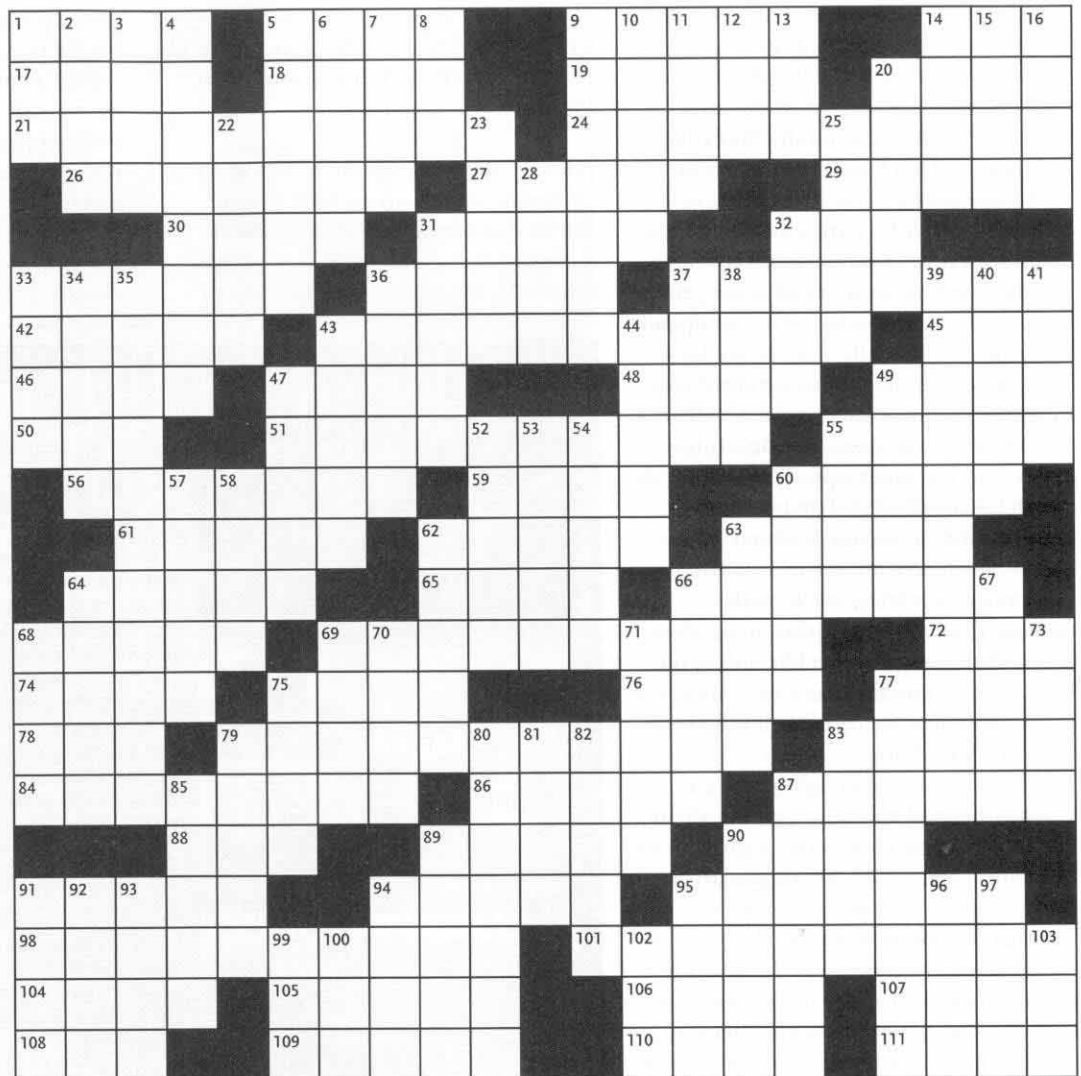
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 9 Slow in learning
 14 Four-in-hand
 17 Vizquel of baseball
 18 Quod ____
 demonstrandum
 19 Draw forth
 20 Window-garden spot
 21 Vulnerable
 24 Genealogical chart
 26 Dye again
 27 "Casablanca" star
 29 Jagged
 30 Deputy Strate
 31 Small streams
 32 Sioux Indian
 33 Prime
 36 Beneficiary
 37 Divested
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 43 Certain turtles
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 46 Eyeglasses' edges
 47 Five-star
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 50 Mass vestment
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 56 Most uncanny
 59 Ligurian Sea feeder
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 14 Beginner
 15 French landmasses
 16 "Waiting for the Robert ____"
 20 Blade sharpener
 22 Present time
 23 Fetch
 25 Himalayan humanoids
 28 Sailor's direction
 31 Radio
 acknowledgment
 32 Church calendar
 33 Antitoxins
 34 Banish
 35 Paul Bunyan and others
 36 Mr. Chips portrayer
 37 Search for
 38 Old salts
 39 Dropped heavily upon
 40 Host
 41 Wild mango
 43 Slack
 44 Saints' emanations
 47 Red as ____

- 49 Rebuff
 52 "Splish Splash" singer
 53 Ruin's partner
 54 Gabriel, for one
 55 Spanish duke
 57 Poet Lizette ____
 58 1/12 of a foot
 60 Foremost
 62 Crude person
 63 New
 64 Prefix for nine
 66 Vote into law
 67 Rane's wraparound
 68 Traveler
 69 "____ Is It"
 70 Guns, as a motor
 71 Old Greek colony
 73 Julia ____ of "Ryan's Hope"
 75 ____ Springs, Oklahoma
 77 Scooped
 79 Available
 80 Obscured

- 81 Physiological syst.
 82 Lace tip
 83 Track entrant
 85 Laurel's partner
 87 Most insignificant
 89 At that place
 90 3-D figures
 91 Noah's numbers
 92 Endless times
 93 Duty
 94 Excoriate
 95 Qtys.
 96 Quarry find
 97 Famous essayist
 99 Second-sight letters
 100 IRS employee
 102 Actress Miranda
 103 Marshy lowland

Solution on page 100.

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