

The History of Central Oregon Birding Groups

The Way I Remember It
by Chuck Gates, April 2022

These are the recollections of an admittedly absent-minded person. Some of these memories are likely faulty but the inaccuracies will be unintended.

I started birding in 1988. I was teaching biology at Culver High School when, one fall, a large flock of gulls landed in our football field. They stayed for several days. It was quite the local news story. Since I was the local biology person, people began to ask me why the gulls were there. I had no clue. Feeling a bit embarrassed at my ignorance, I set out to find out why. This spurred an interest in birds that grew gradually. Then one day I unpacked my first spotting scope. That day, the first bird in my new scope was a Lark Sparrow. From that moment, I was a birder.

For a couple of years, I was completely ignorant of any organization that dealt with birds. Then someone gave me a leaflet called the *Eagle Eye*. I couldn't believe there were so many other people doing what I was doing without my knowledge. I set out to find these people and thus discovered the Central Oregon Audubon Society (COAS). My name first appeared in the *Eagle Eye* in March of 1991. However, I never became a member of the Central Oregon Audubon Society. I lived in Prineville and was in the middle of a busy career, so I never joined. Because of that, I have little first-hand knowledge of the inner workings of that organization or the reasons behind its demise.

By the time I began to be interested in the Audubon Society, it was in its final throes as an organization. I can't speak directly as to why or even how that organization fell apart. I remember hearing that an upset occurred with the board of directors resulting in several resignations. This schism, if that's an accurate term, resulted in a mass exodus of membership and, though the organization itself existed for several years after that, it functionally never recovered.

With the Audubon Society blinking out, there was a vacuum created where there was an interest in having a birding organization but going back to the Audubon Society was not an option. Enter Stephen Shunk. Shunk, a Texan who cut his birding teeth in California, arrived in Central Oregon in 1997 and quickly began to make a name for himself as a bird guide and local expert. Steve had an idea. That idea involved creating an organization that was supported by three pillars: education, field work, and conservation. By 2002, the East Cascades Bird Conservancy (ECBC) was born. Shunk was the natural choice for the first president. Early movers and shakers included Dave Tracy, Judy Meredith, Chris Falco, Dean Hale, Tom Crabtree, me, Diane Kook, Sue Tank, John Gerke, and Steve Dougill. Soon, we were developing programs that would be the backbone of the organization into the 21st century. The Woodpecker Festival, Green Ridge Hawkwatch, Winter raptor surveys, Lewis's Woodpecker Nest Box Project, and the Kestrel Nest Box Project were all conceived or supported by the early leaders of ECBC.

One of the most impressive achievements of the early Board was the development of the Annual Meeting. What began as a meeting of the membership to discuss ECBC business soon evolved into a highly successful fundraiser and social event. At its height, it was by far the largest gathering of birders outside of a paid festival event in the entire state. It often out drew the State OFO Convention by a factor of 4. I have fully supported the Board Members of the COAS, ECBC, and East Cascades Audubon Society (ECAS) at every turn... except the decision to stop hosting the Annual Event. That one still gets me.

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