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Hockanum River offers great setting for winter bird-watching

BY BARBARA ARMENTANO ReminderNews

Bird-watching along the Hockanum River is ideal during the winter months, whether you are a veteran watcher or a “new birder.”



Geese fly at Laurel Marsh. Photo by Jeff Feldmann.

The best time to view birds is early in the morning or later in the afternoon after a fresh snowfall. Many species may be seen on any given day, unless the temperatures are below freezing or if it’s windy.

Jeff Feldmann, a member of the Hockanum Committee, specializes in photographing birds and can identify many varieties on the spot. Feldmann, who always has his camera ready to snap pictures, stresses the importance of dressing warm to withstand the cold. He suggests taking along a bottle of water and a snack to maintain the energy needed for walking on the trails.

There are many benches on the trails, and it’s a good idea to note one located nearby, so you can return for a rest, if needed. For new birders, a bird book will help to identify various species, and Feldmann recommends Peterson’s guide as a good source.

The most numerous water birds along the Hockanum River are the Canada geese. Some of these geese have migrated here for the winter from northern New England and Canada, and

some live here all year long. They can often be seen in the traditional V formation, going from one pond or river to another.

Mallards and wood ducks are also commonly seen in most places on the river. Mallards gather in small groups and mate in early spring. The male mallard is easily identified by its multicolored head in deep green shades, but females are mostly brown and less colorful . Occasionally, a snow goose may be spotted amongst them. Wood ducks are also colorful and considered to be the most beautiful of waterfowl.

There are 25 wood duck boxes along the trails that were built by members of the Hockanum River Committee. The boxes usually have a screen built inside that the babies climb up on when they are ready to leave the nest. After the nests are abandoned, other critters – such as mice, squirrels, owls and other small animals – use them as shelters.

Preying bald eagles can be seen gliding around open, running water, waiting to swoop down on mallards and wood ducks. Red-tail hawks, marsh hawks, shinned and cooper hawks are other species of birds of prey that are habitually spotted along the river from Laurel Marsh to the Quality Inn.

It is difficult to find exact locations for great horned owls, but evidence can be found at the base of hemlock and white pine trees, including signs of owl pellets. Smaller types of birds – such as cardinals, white-throated sparrows, mocking birds, house finches and darkeyed juncos – are plentiful in the area.

Many birds draw attention with their unique sounds, such as a belted kingfisher , as it skims along the water looking for fish. Calls by black-capped chickadees, tufted titmouse, whitebreasted nuthatches, Carolina wrens, American tree sparrows, mourning doves and several varieties of gulls make themselves heard. Downy and hairy woodpeckers and the red-bellied woodpecker sounds are also very distinctive and familiar.

Any birds that you spot along the Hockanum should be named and recorded when sighted, and a list kept for comparison at your next bird-watching experience. Cameras can often miss a moment to snap a picture because birds don't stand and pose. But even if birds can't be identified, it is still exciting to see them in their natural habitat and watch them play and feed.