

# LIGHTS and SHADOWS

from the  
Dishman Hills

April 2010

## “CONK-LA-REE”

The ponds in the Natural Area are displaying some interesting birds that like many of us choose to go south for the winter. Most notable is the red-winged blackbird. These birds are some of the first migratory species to return, encouraged by the lengthening of the days rather than increasing temperatures. They return to join up with the population that wintered over. They travel by night, and rest or feed during the day. The birds don't waste time and their migration is rapid. Males arrive first in groups in a sexually divided migration. On arrival they split up, staking out their territories for the breeding season. Wetlands, and shallow ponds are good places to find them. East pond and the reed-filled West pond are just the spots for the blackbird.



Territorial defense is a big job and the males feed quite a lot for their energy needs. A really attractive male can court up to 15 females, but females can be very choosy. The female birds spent lots of time checking out the territories for the best spots to build a nest and lay eggs. Location, location, location! This mating phase starts the males showing off, and the singing and wing displays begin. They spread their wings to display their bright red shoulder patches and chirp their distinctive “conk-la-ree” song. Without this coordinated flashing of red and impressive singing the male has little hope of defending their territory. The guys like to perch high-up where their display is well observed while the gals stay lower in the vegetation working on the practical matters of nest building.

Researchers have detected a variation in the male's singing that can be described as a regional dialect. The songs are learned by the young by listening to adults, but they also add some creative variations. By adulthood males have four to eight song variations that are sung in sequence. Both sexes have other songs used for various occasions such as alarm (“peeah”) contact calls (“chack”), or aggression (“sheep-sheep-sheep”). So, wander up to the East and West ponds and listen up for the red-winged blackbirds. See if you can detect a Northwest accent!

Many of you have responded to our questionnaire in last month's newsletter as to whether or not you would like to receive the newsletter by e-mail. This maybe your last paper copy if you elected electron distribution and we get our act together to make it happen. Mean while keep those decisions coming. Please be sure to print the e-mail address clearly, computers are so unforgiving. You can also email addresses to Karen at [KJ4Trails@comcast.net](mailto:KJ4Trails@comcast.net).

*Everything is blooming most recklessly,  
If it were voices instead of colors  
There would be an unbelievable shrieking  
In the heart of the night.*

Rainer Rilke, Austrian poet (1875-1926)

## HIKE AND HIKES

Spring in the Hills is in full bloom. The Buttercup hike this month was a great success with about 50 hikers turning out for a lovely day in the woods. This was the 44<sup>th</sup> year for our traditional spring hike. There were but a few buttercups left, but the forest floor was a riot of glacier lilies, grass widows, shooting stars, spring beauties, and blooming serviceberry bushes. The bright yellow flowers of the arrowleaf balsamroot are just starting to emerge. All in all, it appears that Mother Nature has woken up from her winter slumber. We encountered some wildlife, a fair amount of birds, and lots of other hikers having a very enjoyable adventure. Notable were the number of family groups on the trails. The usual wet spots on the route were already drying up, once again suggesting that we are about three weeks ahead of the usual progression of the seasons (buttercups showed up in mid February!).

There is a free hike in the Natural Area sponsored by the **Spokane Mountaineers**, led by **Jeff Lambert** (999-5100) on May 15. Meet at Camp Caro at 9 am for a tour of some outstanding trails and a discussion of the efforts to improve the Dishman Hills for low impact recreation and to connect our natural areas. Contact Jeff by May 8th if you plan to attend. This is the first of the scheduled events for the summer. This will be both fun and educational, so don't miss it!

## ASSOCIATION NEWS

We are a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to saving nature areas in the Spokane region for public enjoyment and education. Call Michael Hamilton, 747-8147, if you have questions. Our board meets every month on the third Tuesday. Our next meeting will be May 18th. We will meet at the Camp Caro lodge at the end of Sargent Rd. Visitors are always welcomed.

The following are our March donors that have consented to be listed: Grey & Lois Baker, Denise Beardslee, Myrna Decker, Nancy Cashon, Jacolyn & Wayne Green, Don Griffiths, Eris Heggem, Tom & Linda Hulett, Karol Kaye, Kathryn Krauss, Cynthia Langlois, Shirley Marpe, Marilyn & John Miller, Ken & Juliet Mondel, Mike & Jeanette Ormsby, Parviz Partovi, Christine Peterson, Paul & Jeanne Salisbury, Marilyn Stedman, Jon Stevenson, Robert Turner, Bill & Edie Wilson, Jeanne Wilson, Hershel Zellman, and one anonymous donor. What a role call of the generous! Thank you .

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