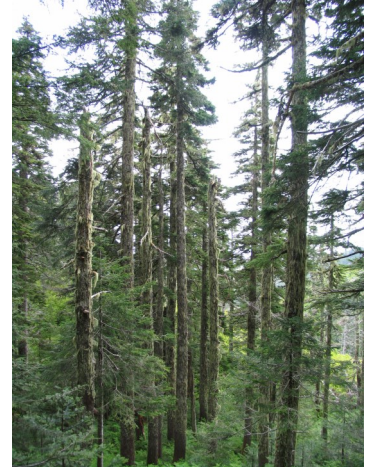


## Birds on the Ridge



The San Juan Ridge fragile sub-alpine ecosystem supports a very limited selection of birds. In spring, some lower elevation birds move up just for the breeding season because there is less competition up here. You may also see migrating species in spring, overhead or resting on their long journeys. From summer into early fall brings the highest number of bird species to the area as more birds move in to take



advantage of the later flowers and accompanying insects at these higher elevations after sea level flowering is finished. In the fall, migrants pass through on their return journey and most of the resident birds return to the lower elevations. Very few bird species spend the harsh winter with its heavy snow fall.

Many birds will spend time near water sources and water-retentive sites such as the bogs. Not only are there plenty of berries and insects in the area but it is thought that migrants may use mountain ridges for navigational purposes. The raptors use the updrafts that occur along the cliff faces and ridges. Also prey may be more available to aerial predators due to the openness of the terrain.

The following is a discussion of the most common birds seen throughout the seasons. They are categorized by where you might find them to help you determine what bird you are hearing or seeing.



American Robin

The first birds we see are as we drive up the road. A common bird at most times of year is the American Robin. Of course they are not as abundant as at sea level but they certainly are the most prolific bird on a rainy day as they are getting worms out of the wet road bed. The American Robin is one of the first breeders in the high country and adapts well to this harsh climate at the higher elevations. The Northern



Northern Flicker

Flicker is also common along roads.

You probably know it by its white rump patch that you see as it flies away. They seem to be especially common late in the year. The Dark-eyed Junco is one tough little bird. You



Dark-eyed Junco

recognize it by the black head and the white outer tail feathers as it flies away from you. It can even lose those tail feathers to a predator and still survive. Studies have shown that they adapt well to breeding at high elevations. They nest close to the ground or at the base of shrubs and sometimes go right underground for a protected nest site.



Band-tailed Pigeon



You may see flocks of Band-tailed Pigeons in the deciduous trees as you drive up into the area. They are true wild pigeons and are getting quite hard-to-find near populated areas. They are always on the lookout for berries.



Sooty Grouse

Grouse are a favourite to see along the road as well as in the forest. The Sooty Grouse (previously called Blue Grouse) is the most common. You can also hear its hooting in the spring. The Ruffed Grouse may fan its tail and put on a performance. If you look carefully in spring as the snow is melting, you might see an indentation in the snow made by the Grouse snuggling down on top of the snow.



Varied Thrush



Winter Wren

Some birds you can even hear as you drive. The Winter Wren is one such bird with 49 different notes in its song. They usually stay close to the forest floor but you might see one searching for bugs on the banks along the edge of the road. They only go to higher elevations to breed when crowded out of lower elevation habitat and do not do that well up higher. Pine Siskins sometimes travel in large flocks. This 'irruptive' species may be very abundant one year and extremely hard to find the next. Look for the yellow on a small non-descript gray-brown bird.



Pine Siskin



Swainson's Thrush

Any time you stop the car or if you are walking the trails, you may hear the Varied Thrush, Swainson's Thrush and Hermit Thrush. It is rare to see these secretive birds but their plaintive songs can be heard throughout the summer. If you camp, listen for the Swainson's Thrush flying overhead and calling in the night. Watch for the Varied Thrush on the road in the fall. It is amazing how many you will see on some days. Watch for the beautiful blue Steller's Jay along the road or into the forest. They move up from the lower elevations for the summer and some may stay into the winter.



Steller's Jay



Hermit Thrush



Bald Eagle



Golden Eagle





Common Raven

If you watch the sky, you will see a number of large raptors when the weather is warm. The Bald Eagle can be sorted out from the Golden Eagle by its white head and tail but it is hard to tell the Golden Eagle from immature Bald Eagles. The



Turkey Vulture

Golden Eagle will have a golden colour to the head and will fly with a slight dihedral to the wings but not as noticeable as the Turkey Vultures. The Turkey Vultures are seen enjoying the thermals but it is unlikely that they breed at this elevation but the Common Raven probably does nest up higher. Watch for nest sites. There are few Northwestern Crows at higher elevations compared to the number of Ravens. Typical hawks can include Red-tailed Hawk and Cooper's Hawk plus Sharp-shinned Hawk in the fall.



Rufous Hummingbird



Orange-crowned Warbler

In open deciduous areas is where you will find the Hummingbirds. By far the most common is the Rufous Hummingbird although there is the occasional Anna's

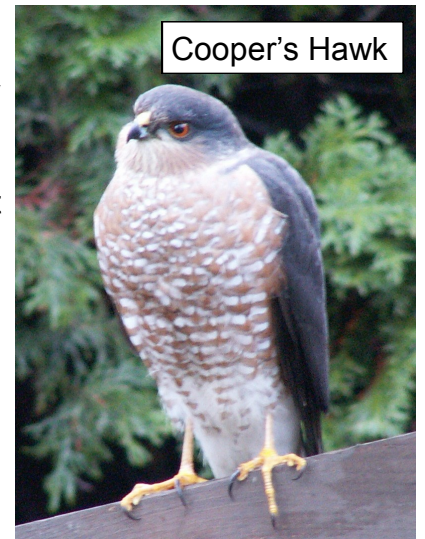


Red-tailed Hawk

Hummingbird throughout the year. The tiny feisty Rufous Hummingbirds appear when the flowers are open about mid-June till about mid-July. Salmonberry and columbine are very popular but they use Avalanche Lilies as well despite hard-to-reach nectar pouches. They are very abundant for a short while and the fights and territorial displays show that they must nest in the area. However, finding a nest is a challenge. The tiny Orange-crowned Warbler sings his heart out early on in June before there is much happening, then goes silent so it would also be a great nest to find. The birds are hard to spot and move around a lot but are a beautiful yellow. The Olive-sided Flycatcher is easy to spot at the top of a dead snag. They are quiet in the beginning but then start their "three-beers" call to help identify them. There seems to be some mating behaviour so it would be great to prove they



Olive-sided Flycatcher



Cooper's Hawk



Fox Sparrow



Song Sparrow





Golden-crowned Sparrow

nest in the area. There are a few Sparrows around. Occasionally you will see them scrounging for food on the ground on the road or trail. The Song Sparrow and Fox Sparrow probably just come up from the lower elevations for the summer. The Fox Sparrow has a totally explosive breeding song that can be heard only during the short breeding time. Watch for Golden-crowned Sparrows in the fall for the berries. There are a few White-crowned Sparrows. An unexpected bird is the Bewick's Wren that can be heard but rarely seen whereas, at sea level, they are quite easy to see. Supposedly, it follows disturbance such as roads to get into an area such as this but would not be expected in the dense forest.



White-crowned Sparrow



Bewick's Wren



Red Crossbill

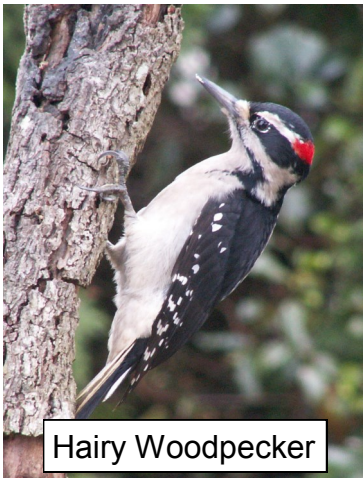


Cedar Waxwing

Some birds you will rarely see up close as they stay high in the tree tops. This includes the Red Crossbills who call with their constant 'chip-chip'. They perch on top of conifers and their bills are specially designed to get seeds out of cones. The male is red and the female is yellow. You hear them early in the year and again later when the berries are ripe. The question is whether they are around breeding when we don't hear them or whether they migrate through. Another bird heard overhead is the Cedar Waxwings. They have a very high pitched call. They probably breed in the area as they have been seen on the nest in Jordan River.



Purple Finch



Hairy Woodpecker

Some birds enjoy the edge of the deep woods. There you will hear the Purple Finch. The male looks like it was dipped in raspberry juice. The drab grey female is one of the few female birds that also sing. You usually only hear the Pacific-slope Flycatcher as it is hard to see high in the trees. As you get near the woods, you may find the Hairy Woodpecker or the smaller look-a-like Downy Woodpecker and rarely may see the Red-breasted Sapsucker. The Sapsucker is often tracked down by the rows of holes that are drilled in a tree, sometimes actually making big squares on a tree. Watch for the tiny Ruby-crowned Kinglet into the fall.

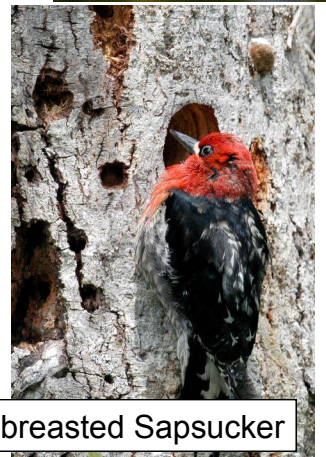


Pacific-slope Flycatcher



Ruby-crowned Kinglet

When you start walking through the conifers, you may still see the Hairy Woodpecker or Downy Woodpecker but you also might see or hear the



Red-breasted Sapsucker





Pileated Woodpecker

Pileated Woodpecker. This large red-headed bird makes quite the noise but the call can be confused with one of the sounds of a Northern Flicker so don't get tricked into thinking it is a Woodpecker until you see it in the spring but the Flicker doesn't make that sound in the fall so the confusion disappears. You can tell Pileated Woodpecker holes as they are quite rectangular looking. Other smaller birds who like the conifer forest are the Red-breasted Nuthatch who works down the tree and the Brown Creeper who works up the tree. Also seen are the Chestnut-backed Chickadee and Golden-crowned Kinglet will hang around into the winter if food is available. The Owls are mostly seen in the forest. Great Horned Owls and Barred Owls are the common big owls. Possible small owls are the Northern Pygmy Owl and the Northern Saw-whet Owl which migrates through in the fall. Listen when you are camping to see what will call. The "who-cooks-for-you" tells you it is a Barred Owl. The Great Horned Owl give a "who's awake - me too" call and the smaller owls give single toots that are hard to tell apart.



Red-breasted Nuthatch



Brown Creeper



Chestnut-backed Chickadee



Golden-crowned Kinglet

A bird which is the signature bird for the San Juan Ridge area is the Gray Jay, sometimes called Whiskey Jack. It is only found at higher elevations. The young are produced early in the season as soon as we can get up into the high country and seem to be born knowing how to beg. They will con you out of your trail mix or a left-over sandwich and are very vocal if you don't cooperate.



Barred Owl



Great Horned Owl



Northern Pygmy Owl



Gray Jay



Common Nighthawk



Finally just a few notes about the birds around the bogs and the lakes. A surprise in the bogs is hearing the Common Nighthawk in the middle of the day. Normally at sea level, they only call almost at dusk. Listen for the 'witchedy-witchedy' call of



Common Yellowthroat



Belted Kingfisher



Great Blue Heron

the bright yellow Common Yellowthroat anywhere around the bogs. The Belted Kingfisher has been seen eating the salamanders out of the ponds and the Great Blue Heron eats the frogs. Sandhill Cranes stop by on migration and eat the cranberries in the high bogs. Ducks that you might see later in the fall on the lakes include Mallard, Merganser, American Wigeon, Green-winged Teal and Common Loon. The only shorebird that you might see is the Spotted Sandpiper who constantly bobs its tail.



Sandhill Crane



Green-winged Teal

So let's finish with a few mysteries for us to resolve. We have heard rumours of Marbled Murrelets flying up from Port Renfrew to the western edge of the ridge. They could have nests as they are known to travel great distances to feed their chicks hidden well inland. Let's try to find out more about them. Then how about the Sand Hill Cranes? Do they just fly over in the fall or do they stop at some of those high lakes? It is possible that they nest at the highest elevations as there are nests recorded from similar habitat near Ladysmith. Or find a Three-toed Woodpecker. They are reported from similar habitat from Mount Washington and Mount Arrowsmith so could be somewhere around. But no chance of finding a Vancouver island White-tailed Ptarmigan as we are not quite high enough.



Common Loon



Spotted Sandpiper

Some suggested reference books: Birds of BC by Campbell, Dawe, McTaggart-Cowan, Kaiser, et al; Sibley Guide to Birds; National Geographic Birds of North America and Peterson's Field Guide to Western Birds.

References on the web: For a fascinating account of Dr. Kathy Martin's work on use by birds of alpine and subalpine habitats, consult [www.forestry.ubc.ca/alpine](http://www.forestry.ubc.ca/alpine) . Her work was used extensively in the preparation of this information. The two great sites that were used to obtain the photos (with permission) are [www.dereila.ca](http://www.dereila.ca) and [www.vancouverislandbirds.com](http://www.vancouverislandbirds.com) . The first one also contains flowers and bugs and other natural history things as well. To find bird songs and calls, Google "Bird Songs" or the particular bird song or call that you wish to hear to obtain many excellent references.

To report any interesting birds in this area, contact Victoria Natural History Society member Agnes Lynn at thelynns at shaw.ca or Phoebe Dunbar or Maywell Wickham in Sooke. Maywell's list of birds, collected over many years, forms the basis of the list of birds provided with this information on the following pages. Also included is a list of birds that should be in the area so would be worth watching for.

See following pages for the Bird Lists.

Agnes Lynn  
thelynns at shaw.ca

**The following are birds that have been seen in the area:**

Canada Goose	Barred Owl	American Dipper
Greater White-fronted Goose	Northern Saw-whet Owl	Golden-crowned Kinglet
American Wigeon	Common Nighthawk	Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Mallard	Anna's Hummingbird	Swainson's Thrush
Green-winged Teal	Rufous Hummingbird	Hermit Thrush
Common Merganser	Belted Kingfisher	American Robin
Ruffed Grouse	Red-breasted Sapsucker	Varied Thrush
Sooty Grouse (formerly Blue Grouse)	Downy Woodpecker	Cedar Waxwing
Common Loon	Hairy Woodpecker	Orange-crowned Warbler
Great Blue Heron	Northern Flicker	Yellow-rumped Warbler
Turkey Vulture	Pileated Woodpecker	Townsend's Warbler
Osprey	Olive-sided Flycatcher	MacGillivray's Warbler
Bald Eagle	Hammond's Flycatcher	Common Yellow-throat
Sharp-shinned Hawk	Pacific-slope Flycatcher	Wilson's Warbler
Cooper's Hawk	Hutton's Vireo	Western Tanager
Red-tailed Hawk	Warbling Vireo	Fox Sparrow
Golden Eagle	Gray Jay	Song Sparrow
Merlin	Steller's Jay	White-crowned Sparrow
Sandhill Crane	Northwestern Crow	Golden-crowned Sparrow
Greater Yellowlegs	Common Raven	Dark-eyed Junco
Mew Gull	Barn Swallow	Pine Grosbeak
Marbled Murrelet	Chestnut-backed Chickadee	Purple Finch
Band-tailed Pigeon	Red-breasted Nuthatch	House Finch
Great Horned Owl	Brown Creeper	Red Crossbill
Snowy Owl	Bewick's Wren	Pine Siskin
Northern Pygmy Owl	Winter Wren	American Goldfinch



**Birds that should be here but just have not been recorded as yet:**

Northern Shoveler	Horned Lark
Barrow's Goldeneye	Violet-green Swallow
Northern Goshawk	Mountain Bluebird
American Kestrel	Townsend's Solitaire
Peregrine Falcon	American Pipit
American Coot	Spotted Towhee
Killdeer	Chipping Sparrow
Spotted Sandpiper	Savannah Sparrow
Baird's Sandpiper	Lincoln's Sparrow
Common Snipe	Black-headed Grosbeak
Black Swift	Western Meadowlark
Vaux Swift	Brewer's Blackbird
Three-toed Woodpecker	White-winged Crossbill
Cassin's Vireo	Evening Grosbeak