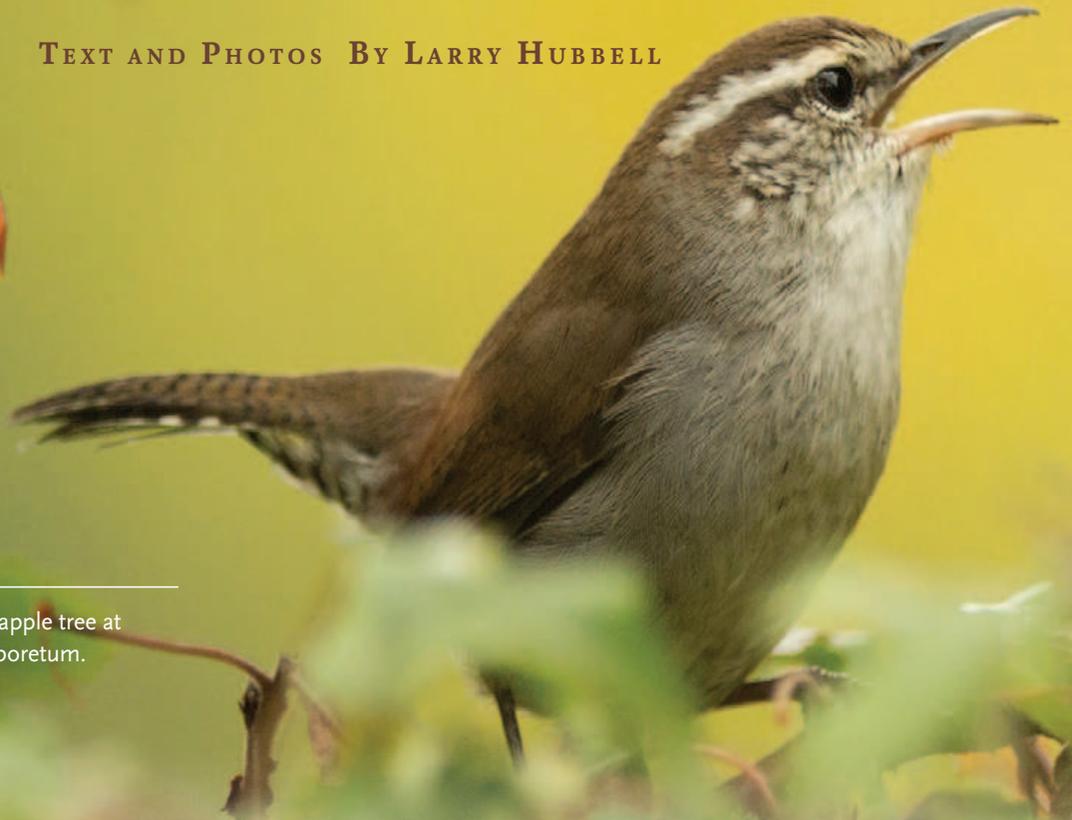


# BIRDS IN THE ARBORETUM REVISITED

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY LARRY HUBBELL



Bewick's Wren in a crabapple tree at  
Washington Park Arboretum.

In fall 1942, a young biologist named Earl J. Larrison wrote an article for the “Bulletin” entitled “Birds of the Arboretum.” In it, he listed 133 species of birds, 79 of which he categorized as land birds and 54 as water birds. (You can peruse a copy of this “Bulletin”—Volume 5, number 9—in the Miller Library, at the Center for Urban Horticulture.)

In 2011, almost 80 years later, I began photographing birds in and around the Arboretum, and I continue to do so on a regular basis. Since the 1940s, the human population in Seattle has nearly doubled, and the world’s population has tripled. Loss of habitat due to population growth in our city has no doubt affected the number of birds and species migrating through the Arboretum.

Between 1916 and 1966, much of the marsh and mud along the shoreline near the Arboretum,

and to the north of Union Bay, was used as a repository for Seattle City waste. Moreover, across the U.S. the chemical DDT, which dramatically weakened the eggshells of predatory birds, was legally used until 1972.

Plus, over the years, there has been increasing competition from new species of birds (exotics and U.S. natives alike) that were not found in our region in 1942—for example, the European Starling, Barred Owl, Anna’s Hummingbird, and lately, the Eurasian Collared-Dove. Under these circumstances, a decline in the number of native birds and bird species is not a surprise.

What is surprising is that most of the species Earl Larrison documented can still be seen in or around the Arboretum. In the last six years, I have personally photographed two thirds of Larrison’s bird species here, and in the adjacent



Common Yellowthroat



Wilson's Warbler



Pacific Wren

Union Bay area. Many of the other species are still occasionally seen or heard. Although counts are generally reduced, as far as I know, all of Larrison's documented bird species can still be found in our Puget Sound neighborhood.

### **An Oasis for Birdlife**

We, the current citizens of Seattle, owe a debt of gratitude to the University of Washington Botanic Gardens. The University staff and arborists care for the Arboretum's internationally renowned collection of trees, but they also manage the park to protect and enhance wildlife habitat. For example, over the years, snags of native trees (especially alders and cottonwoods) have been left as critical nesting and feeding habitat, and a significant subset of the marshland near Foster Island has been retained. (The UW staff must

also be given credit for managing the Union Bay Natural Area on the north side of Union Bay, which opened in 1972 and was built over a portion of the Seattle City landfill.)

As part of the new Loop Trail construction, many native plants have been reintroduced, and streambed enhancements have been made in and around Arboretum Creek. In addition, the Seattle Parks employees and the Arboretum Foundation's Steward volunteers fight valiantly to keep invasive plants at bay in the Arboretum. I have no doubt the number of bird species in the Arboretum would be much lower without the efforts of these critically important people and organizations.

There have been some local success stories for raptors. Due in part to the regulation of DDT, beginning in early 1970s, Peregrine Falcons and



Pileated Woodpecker nestlings in a tree snag.



Anna's Hummingbird feeding its young.

Bald Eagles have returned to Union Bay—and the eagles, especially, are often seen and heard in the Arboretum. Last year, for the first time in over 80 years, Osprey nested and reproduced on Union Bay. Cooper's Hawks seem to have adapted to city life, and their numbers in the city appear to be growing.

Bird species—such as Red-Breasted Sapsuckers, Turkey Vultures and Trumpeter Swans—that Larrison did not document are occasionally seen in or around the Arboretum. And many rarities not mentioned by Larrison have passed through the Union Bay area during the last few years. White-Fronted Goose, Red-Naped Sapsucker, Northern Shrike, Barrow's Goldeneye and Tufted Duck are a few that I have photographed.

### Improving Avian Habitat

The challenge before us is how to reverse the overall declining number of bird species in and around the Arboretum. At least one major opportunity is coming our way during the next decade. I understand that once the new SR 520 Bridge is ultimately completed, the on-ramps from Lake Washington Boulevard will be fully removed, and the land beneath the ramps (the "WSDOT Peninsula") will become part of the Arboretum again. The central portion of this land is currently covered in rocks and temporary buildings, while it is being used as a staging area for the 520 construction. It's my personal hope that when this land is uncovered, at least some of it could be "redeveloped" into a variety of natural habitats.

Bald Eagle pair perched above Azalea Way.





Red-Breasted Sapsucker drilling holes in a tree trunk.



A parent and first-year Trumpeter Swan on Union Bay.

Locally speaking, shorebirds and marsh birds have been among the primary habitat losers over the years. Some examples of birds we seldom see, that might return to use these types of habitat, include Short-Eared Owls, Kestrels, Northern Harriers, and maybe even Snow Geese.

Future mitigation efforts stemming from the rebuild of the SR 520 Bridge—and indeed the construction of the new bridge itself—will have some positive impacts for birds and other wildlife. These include the rerouting of the 520 freeway runoff so that it no longer drains into Union Bay. This will help the fish that live in the currently polluted water, and the birds that eat the fish. They should all live longer, healthier, and more productive lives.

There is a plan to remove the culvert containing the lower portion of Arboretum Creek that currently prevents fish from going upstream. Also, the higher elevation of the new bridge over Foster Island will enable the growth of vegetation underneath. Finally, the combination of the bridge's higher elevation and its new, high-tech pavement will make Foster Island much quieter. This will help the birds save energy by lowering the required volume of their vocalizations. (It will also allow us to hear and enjoy more of their songs.) All of these changes will have a net positive impact on the avian life in and around the Arboretum.

We, the citizens who live around Union Bay and farther afield, might also reconsider the types

Osprey family nesting by Union Bay.



A pair of Cooper's Hawks in the Pinetum.





A young Barred Owl.

of plants, grasses and trees we allow to grow in our yards. Having a strong preference for native flora will help provide critical food, habitat and nest sites for native birds. Retaining mature trees and leaving snags in our yards would also help to provide nest sites and food sources.

Finally, we each could consider building bird boxes in our gardens. Residents with shorefront homes have especially productive opportunities. I am happy to offer suggestions regarding the optimal size and shape of nest boxes to any of my neighbors around the Arboretum. My email address is [ldhubbell@comcast.net](mailto:ldhubbell@comcast.net). ☺

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## Name That Bird!

Here's a gentle challenge. Currently, about 10 percent of the species described by Earl Larrison in the 1942 "Bulletin" have been given new names, for one reason or another. Try matching up each of these old names with its replacement.

### Old Names:

- A. Red-backed Sandpiper
- B. Whistling Swan
- C. Holboell Grebe
- D. Pigeon Hawk
- E. Sparrow Hawk
- F. Marsh Hawk
- G. Russet-Backed Thrush
- H. Western Flycatcher
- I. Seattle Wren
- J. Winter Wren
- K. Bald Pate
- L. Black Dominoed Yellow-Throat Warbler
- M. Black-Capped Pileolated Warbler
- N. Solitary Warbler

### New Names:

- 1. American Wigeon
- 2. Bewick's Wren
- 3. Dunlin
- 4. Cassin's Warbler
- 5. Common Yellowthroat
- 6. Kestrel
- 7. Merlin
- 8. Northern Harrier
- 9. Pacific-Slope Flycatcher
- 10. Pacific Wren
- 11. Red-necked Grebe
- 12. Tundra Swan
- 13. Swanson's Thrush
- 14. Wilson's Warbler

### The Name Key:

1 = K, 2 = I, 3 = A, 4 = N, 5 = L, 6 = K, 7 = D, 8 = F, 9 = H, 10 = J, 11 = C, 12 = B, 13 = G, 14 = M