

a creek flowing through it, and Mount Rosalie nearby. The ranch house burned down, and the Kuhlbers rebuilt it. Here Otto raised cattle, painted the West, and exhibited his work in museums. After two decades, they sold the ranch and moved to Santa Fe, returning to Denver shortly before he died at age 83.

His legacy of 250 etchings, innovative pencil drawings of monorails and dome cars, countless watercolors and oil paintings, is breathtaking, but probably the most

haunting of his works is his series of 12 paintings in 1964 depicting the tragedy of the coal miners in Southern Colorado titled *The Land of Lost Souls*. It is on permanent display in the Denver Public Library.

Mark your calendars

Dan Blegen created his unique docu-concert format in 2012 with the premiere of *Hard Travelin': Woody Guth-*

rie's Life and Songs. On July 19, Blegen will present this story of the Oklahoma balladeer whose simple but evocative songs have enriched America's musical landscape for generations. This program is free and open to all. The venue is the Palmer Lake Town Hall, 28 Valley Crescent. Doors open at 6:30 p.m. and the program begins at 7. Light refreshments are served after the presentation. ■

Bird Watch on the Palmer Divide

Great egret

By Elizabeth Hacker

It's summer and songbirds are nesting. By now most chicks will be ready to fledge the nest. It's a quiet time of the year when songbirds stop singing and become more secretive.

While it may not be the best time to look for songbirds, it's a great time to see wading birds, including herons, bitterns, and white-faced ibis, that are found near wetlands, shallow lakes, and streams in Southern Colorado.

Hérons common to this region include the great blue heron, black crowned night heron, green heron, and the white-faced ibis. Less common are the egrets, or the white herons, including the snowy and great egrets.

Snowy egret

The snowy egret migrates through this region and nests along the Front Range and in eastern Colorado but is less common here. It is a medium-size heron about 2 feet tall with a 3.5-inch wingspan. It has snow-white plumage, a dark pointed beak, yellow eye lores, and long black legs with bright yellow feet. If I'm lucky, I may see them maybe three or four times during the summer or early fall. They are not all that common and I am always thrilled to see one.



Above: The snowy egret is a medium-size wading bird with a dark beak, yellow eye lores, long black legs, and bright yellow feet. Photo by Terri Underhill.

Great egret

The great egret is a large elegant white heron, just over 3 feet tall with a wingspan that approaches 5 feet. It has long black legs, black feet, blue eye lores, and a yellow

beak.

Until recently, I had never seen the great egret here. It is commonly found along the Mississippi flyway and coastal areas. According to the guide books, there are a few areas in Colorado where they nest, and many years ago I observed a nesting pair among many great blue herons at the Chatfield Reservoir rookery.

A few weeks ago, I was checking a line of bluebird houses and thought I saw a white plastic bag lodged in the long grasses at the edge of a wetland. But a plastic bag doesn't have flapping wings! To my surprise, it was a juvenile great egret. It seemed odd that it didn't fly away when it saw me. I cautiously approached the bird, yet it still didn't fly away. Something was amiss.

My first thought was that it had injured a wing, but it was flapping both wings. Could it be caught in fishing line or a trap? When I moved closer I saw a medium-size snapping turtle clamped on to the back of the egret's foot. Normally an egret could use its long neck and sharp beak to kill a turtle, but this turtle had the egret from behind, the only place the egret couldn't reach it. This bird was in serious danger of becoming turtle food.

I have mixed feelings about interfering with wildlife and rarely intervene. Perhaps because I'd never seen a great egret here and it was a juvenile, I felt the need to help. I looked around for a long stick because I didn't want to get within striking distance of that egret's beak. An egret sharpens its beak by rubbing it along a rock or a smooth log, much like a chef sharpens knives. Egrets use their beak to spear fish and because this egret had



Above: The great egret is a large wading bird with a yellow beak, blue eye lores, long black legs, and black feet. Photo by Terri Underhill.

no way knowing that I was trying to help, it might have speared me.

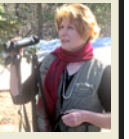
Once a snapper has something in its jaws, it doesn't let go. I wasn't sure if poking at the turtle would save the egret or hasten its demise. My first attempt at poking the turtle in the eye resulted in the turtle pulling the egret toward deeper water. I entered the water carefully just in case there was another snapper waiting to bite me. Again, I unsuccessfully poked at the turtle's head while the egret flapped its wings. I was close enough to the egret to see terror in its eyes. On my third attempt, I poked while the egret desperately flapped with all its might and finally pulled free from the turtle's jaws and the turtle swam away. The egret flew up to the top of the bank and, before flying away, it turned to look at me as if to say "thank you."

It's unlikely the turtle would open its jaws to let go, so the egret may be missing a portion of its foot, but it should survive. While I feel good about helping the egret, I regret that the turtle lost its meal.

Life in the wild is tough and only the strong, healthy, and wise survive. In addition to predators, birds battle drought, storms, floods, and wildfires. This egret may have been out of its normal range due to a recent storm, or maybe changing climate conditions are causing the species to expand its range.

While I have traveled to many countries and logged more than 1,000 species of birds, I find birding locally with family and friends just as interesting. If you are looking for a fun and affordable hobby, birding offers a way to experience and learn about the world we share with wildlife.

Elizabeth Hacker can be reached at elizabethhacker@ocn.me.



Above: Snapping turtle. Photo by Westin Hacker.

High Altitude Nature and Gardening (HANG)

Ponderosa pine needle compost; mid-summer garden tips

By Janet Sellers

Ponderosa forests and the "natural feel" of our area inspire settling here. Our iconic ponderosas are drought resistant, fire resistant, provide great habitat for wildlife, and make great lumber and attractive but very large landscape trees. Sadly, many people do not know the rich source of compost soil ponderosas can create.

Landscape focus for humans is plants, be they flowers, trees, crops, or forests. The focus for plant life is sun, soil, and water to create their life using their leafy, solar-powered pantry via photosynthesis. I have researched ethnobiology and ethnobotany regarding soil for decades, trying to learn ancient secrets for keeping up naturally thriving forests, farms, and gardens, perhaps with stewardship lessons from the ancients. So far, the most powerful idea is clear: Nature knows best, she can teach us. Her instruction comes in the form of her smallest helpers that generate great power in huge numbers—her microbiological helpers that create soil.

We don't have homes that we can pack up and move to more optimal locations when nature makes her wildfires as our First Nations people knew to do. They stewarded the lands in ways that encouraged what they needed to grow near them, and optimally accessed the plentiful foods close by. When wildfires or other natural harms came their way, they also knew how to move on efficiently beyond those dangers to safe, well-understood, places to live. We live in "stick homes" and sometimes tragically lose our homes to the natural elements because ours are not mobile.

Our forests and landscapes need our help to thrive now; we've invaded them and we're the current stewards. I always figured surely there is a better way to ac-

cess the hidden secrets of the forest, especially pine needles, without throwing them all into the trash. I am concerned with forest growth and decay as a natural process to feed the forest at all its life levels of flora and fauna but feel conflicted regarding home safety and pine needles in the face of wildfires and fire mitigation. How to optimally steward our beloved forests amid human land development and commercial overpowering of natural ways with violent earth scraping and removal of natural elements and then adding lab chemicals?

I found one good answer via research at the Washington State University (WSU) Extension Forestry Stewardship program. The program reported making a garden-ready compost within six weeks to three months from ponderosa pine needles, experimenting with three specific treatments of pine needles. The issue with pine needles is that they have a cuticle, or covering, that is decay resistant, which is very good for the tree's health and the forest floor, but which makes it slower to decay than other materials for use in compost.

For the WSU Extension Forestry Stewardship program, the three test versions of the ponderosa pine needles used were: fresh, whole needles from the current year (cuticle intact and protective), fresh needles that were shredded but also from the current year (and thereby somewhat open to microbial action), and aged, 1-year-old shredded ponderosa needles that were gathered from the previous year for the program (and thereby the cuticle was somewhat damaged and already open to microbes for decomposition).

The program replicated each of the three ponderosa needle versions four times in the recipe below, and all ingredients were the same except for the stated



Above: This summer, Monument Community Garden volunteers hope to demonstrate square-foot gardening, vertical gardening, and use of the olla watering system, known and used worldwide by the ancients for thousands of years, to keep food gardens hydrated even in desert climates. The movement of the water across the olla wall is stimulated by the dryness of the soil underground, and nearby plant roots (within a 36-inch diameter of the pot) benefit underground from the soil's draw of water. Here, in the three sisters garden bed, common terracotta pots are placed in holes in the soil, with rims even to the soil surface. The hole is plugged, and pots are then filled with water and topped off with a terracotta saucer. The hydration is usually good for several days up to a week or more depending on moisture factors in the soil related to rainy or dry conditions. Photos by Janet Sellers.

