



PHOTO PROVIDED BY SKY GUARDIAN FALCONRY

Wings and Wine

DISCOVER NATIVE AND MIGRATING FOWL IN WINE COUNTRY

BY GREG NORTON

Approximately one-third of American adults—over 96 million people—engaged in some form of birdwatching in 2022. That surprising figure from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reveals a dramatic increase in ornithological interest since the pandemic. If you don't consider yourself part of the boom, maybe you should. Recent studies reported by The Washington Post linked interaction with nature—and the sound of birdsong specifically—with improved mental health. Reduced levels of stress and anxiety, and even improved cognition were found among study participants. Birds are everywhere, inviting us to deepen our understanding of nature and its benefits. This is especially true in Oregon's wine country, where they not only live alongside the vines but also assume roles as avian vineyard workers.

AVIAN NEIGHBORS

Partners in life as well as in business, Malia Myers and Melaney Schmidt recently moved their sparkling wine-focused winery, Landmass Wines, to the Columbia Gorge. By relocating to Cascade Locks, they reduced costs and made sourcing fruit from both Oregon and eastern Washington vineyards easier. Proximity to the Columbia River also supplies a front-row seat to view area bird activity. Nesting ospreys and circling turkey vultures are fair-weather friends while winter and spring bring sightings of bald eagles. Heron and

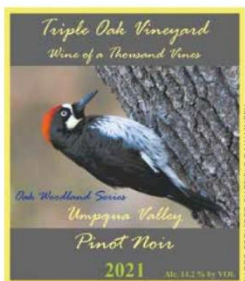


PHOTO PROVIDED BY TRIPLE OAK WINERY

other waterfowl live there year-round. Eager to share the experience, the winery welcomes groups of six or more for wine tastings by appointment.

West of Salem, near Dallas, lies the nearly 2500-acre Baskett Slough National Wildlife Refuge, a vital habitat for many bird species. Named for the original settler and landowner, George J. Baskett, the slough includes trails, observation decks and access roads, allowing a visit any time of year. The preserve, established in 1965, becomes a wintering home for dusky Canada geese. Now, bald eagles, kestrels, owls, pintails and streaked horned larks flourish there.

Waterfowl proliferate in the winter while spring welcomes other migratory birds. "The big migration is late April [and] early May when the warblers are coming through," notes Frank Kolwicz, a local photographer who has spent countless hours capturing images of the preserve's avian visitors.

As the wetlands give way to farmlands northwest of Baskett Slough, the vineyards of the Van Duzer Corridor AVA become visible. Andante Vineyard's inviting tasting room and production facility rests on a knoll between the wildlife refuge and a preserved oak savannah bordering the surrounding vines. Their portfolio of small-production wines reflects a serious commitment to whites, including Sauvignon Blanc, Aligoté and Chardonnay. They also craft Pinot Noir and other red varieties. Enticing food pairings, prepared by executive chef Caleb Warner, make this a delicious destination for hungry wine lovers visiting Baskett Slough.

Egrets, frequently seen on the property's pond and a walking path, invite guests to explore the site. Brandon Correa, wine to vine principal, recalls hearing the hoots of Great Horned Owls while walking the path on his first day on the job. "You just feel it in your bones," he recalled.

Farther south, in the Umpqua Valley, Ford's Pond offers municipal park-like



PHOTO PROVIDED BY SOKOL BLOSSER WINERY

amenities along with hiking trails, wetlands and oak savanna. Over 200 species of birds have been sighted here, including migratory populations. The 95-acre pond was created in the 1950s for the storage needs of a logging company. Since then, the city of Sutherlin purchased the 202-acre site and, in cooperation with the enthusiastic advocacy of the nonprofit Friends of Ford's Pond, has added accessible features, including paved parking and a playground.

Nearby, amid the antique shops of quaint downtown Historic Oakland, is the Triple Oak Wine Vault tasting room, housed in an old bank building. Owner Betty Tamm has two acres of grapevines a few miles away. They grow alongside a mixed oak woodland. Triple Oak's award-winning wines include red and white blends, Gewürztraminer, Pinot Gris, Pinot Noir and Tempranillo.

"I've always been interested in birds residing within oak woodland," Tamm said. "You get a lot of birds that thrive in that habitat." She shares her interest by depicting birds on her wine labels and delights in the conservation efforts underway at Ford's Pond. A visit to the historic town could be followed by a picnic at the pond. "It's a wonderful outing," she said. And, by booking her adjacent Airbnb, "people can make a weekend of it."

ABOVE: A bluebird nesting box at Sokol Blosser Winery. RIGHT: A peek inside an occupied bluebird nesting box with tiny eggs.

WORKING BIRDS

Some Oregon vineyards rely on birds to help control insect and rodent pests, reducing the need for chemicals while contributing to a sustainable farming environment.

Newberg's Raptor Ridge Winery, in the Laurelwood District AVA, frequently hosts local birdwatchers as they sample wine on the property's aptly named "Flight Deck." Red-tailed hawks, bald eagles and owls frequently hunt between the vines, according to their director of marketing and membership, Tanya Zumach. "We are a sustainability-focused winery and, as such, encourage our birds of prey neighbors to live here and provide a natural balance to the environment," she said.

Master falconer Alina Blankenship is committed to education about birds of prey. Her nonprofit organizations PERCH and Wings Over Wine partner with wineries, schools and community groups. "When you're a hair's width away from my great horned owl and her giant yellow eyes, it's transformative for a lot of people," she said.



PHOTO PROVIDED BY SOKOL BLOSSER WINERY

In addition to consulting with vineyards like Raptor Ridge on how best to attract rodent-hunting birds, she also runs Sky Guardian, with trained falcons to discourage smaller birds from eating grapes at harvest time. "When I have 10,000 starlings over a grape crop, I put up what I call my 'border collie,'" she explained. "And she follows them up, pushes them down the row, scaring them right off the property." (Blankenship was profiled in our October 2021 issue.)

See WINGS AND WINE on page 46

Plan your visit:

Landmass Wines, landmasswines.com

Baskett Slough National Wildlife Refuge, 10995 Highway 22, Dallas, fws.gov/refuge/baskett-slough

Andante Vineyard, 3855 Morris Rd., Dallas, andantevineyard.com

Ford's Pond, 382 Church Rd., Sutherlin (location for GPS), fordspond.org

Triple Oak Wine Vault, 137 N.W. Locust St., Oakland, tripleoakwinevault.com

Raptor Ridge Winery, 18700 S.W. Hillsboro Hwy., Newberg, raptorridgewinery.com

Sokol Blosser Winery, 5000 N.E. Sokol Blosser Ln., Dayton, sokolblosser.com

Learn more:

Download Merlin, a free smartphone app, merlin.allaboutbirds.org

Answer three simple questions about a bird you are trying to identify and Merlin will list possible matches. It can also "listen" to the birds around you or use your photo to suggest real-time identifications.

Wings Over Wine, wingsoverwine.com

PERCH Wildlife Education, theperch.org

Sky Guardian, skyguardianfalconry.com

Prescott Bluebird Recovery Project, prescottbluebird.com

TOP: A raptor and puppy race through a vineyard. RIGHT: Oakland's Triple Oak Winery features local birds on their wine labels.