

back cast

By Ron Wilson



I'm not a hotshot birder by any stretch, but I know enough to now and again properly identify whatever it is that's flitting through the trees or resting on a fence post.

And if I don't know what I'm looking at, I'll try to remember distinct markings, coloration and size so I can look it up later in one of the field guides. I've thought about keeping a list, birders call it a life list, I believe, of what I've seen out and about. But if I did that, I know some of my entries would only be best guesses. And what's the point in keeping a list of half truths?

Last summer while bumming around a trout stream in Montana I spotted a bird "swimming" and walking underwater in search of aquatic insects. I was more surprised that I remembered the name of the bird, water ouzel, than I was at being treated to its unique routine. (Later, when confirming my find in a field guide, I couldn't find water ouzel, but finally located it under American dipper, which made perfect sense, considering the bird repeatedly dipped at the knees while on land.)

I watched for some time, marveling at its success of picking off the occasional bug in current that seemed way too strong for an 8-inch bird that no way outweighed the nearly empty can that held my lunch of smoked oysters.

The fishing had been darn slow for the past three days, so sharing lunch with an entertaining critter was welcome. When the ouzel left, I rinsed the can, stowed it in my backpack and headed upstream.

The fishing didn't get any better, even later in the day when the sun went off the water and you'd expect the trout to be nosing around a little more aggressively. Going in, I fully anticipated catching a lot of fish – and some big ones, too – for no other reason than that's what you expect on a fishing trip on a relatively celebrated river.

Even so, I wasn't too bummed because it was a pretty river and I had plenty of it to myself, which is a rarity nowadays. And if the fishing had been hot, I'd certainly have missed the water ouzel and its antics because I would not have paused long enough for lunch.

This is a long way around to saying that you just never know how things are going to shake out. And that's sort of where we

are in North Dakota as we anticipate the loss of acres and acres of some of our best wildlife habitat.

It's no secret that the Conservation Reserve Program, the government's biggest conservation program, has been a boon to wildlife in North Dakota, and, in turn, to hunters. It stands to reason, unfortunately, that at some point pheasant, duck and other wildlife populations (100 or so grass-dependent songbird species included) will decline, along with places in which to hunt them.

What we'll likely see is more competition (but who knows how much) on public lands because our playing field is getting smaller. Meaning: Those people who hunted mostly on private CRP acres that have since been converted to croplands, will need a place to go.

If you're like me, you'll be out there this fall to see how this plays out. The routine will be the same as it has been for the last 20 years: I'll hunt old haunts and seek out new ones, hoping for a bird here and there to keep the dogs interested. I don't need a lot of room, or a lot of birds, but I do demand a good view at lunch, which is pretty easy to come by in rural North Dakota.

The thing is, you can't fault landowners for taking their land out of CRP because it makes economic sense for many of them. But you can bemoan decision makers for cutting the nationwide CRP cap from 39 million acres to 32 million, and not using the savings from the lost 7 million acres to make CRP rental rates more competitive, which would provide interested landowners a choice.

Nonhunters who read this likely won't get what the fuss is all about, but it does matter. For many of us who do hunt, it's not just something we do on the weekends, but a way of life. Aside from being one of the best places in the country to raise kids, hunting and fishing opportunities add greatly to the package that makes North Dakota what it is.

There's a reason thousands of folks who live elsewhere make the pilgrimage to our state each fall. And it's certainly one of the big reasons why I haven't considered moving back to my home state of Oregon in 20-plus years.