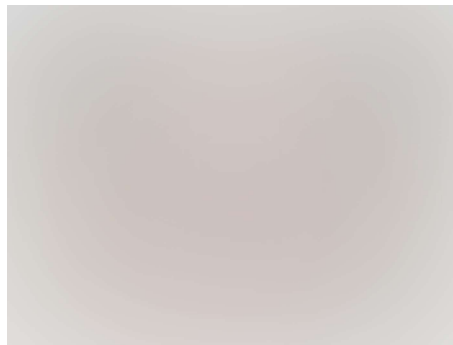


[https://www.dailyrecordnews.com/outdoors/keen-connects-helen-mccabe-state-park-is-an-oasis-for-bird-lovers/article\\_2124578c-bc9e-5022-b3ba-1b2d2999e0ab.html](https://www.dailyrecordnews.com/outdoors/keen-connects-helen-mccabe-state-park-is-an-oasis-for-bird-lovers/article_2124578c-bc9e-5022-b3ba-1b2d2999e0ab.html)

## **KEEN Connects: Helen McCabe State Park is an oasis for bird lovers**

By Deborah Essman Contributing Columnist  
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Deborah Essman

Autumn — it's my favorite time of year. Summer always seems so frantic, but now the garden beds are put to rest and I can enjoy all that fall has to offer. The first week of November I went to one of my favorite local spots to watch birds — Helen McCabe State Park. Although the beautiful colors of the season are mostly gone (remember those tempestuous October winds we had), there were still a few yellow, dusty maroon and burnt-sienna colored leaves clinging to the trees. And the birding, as always, was like a treasure hunt.

Helen McCabe State Park sits at the mouth of the Yakima Canyon, an oasis that many locals have yet to discover. The Kittitas Environmental Education Network (KEEN) has leased it from the state for years, transforming it from just a little gravel pond off the highway to a thriving wildlife sanctuary. Many thousands of dollars in donations and hard-earned grant money, as well as the labor of hundreds of hours of volunteers, have gone into planting native grasses, shrubs, and trees. Along with help from the

Kittitas County Field and Stream Club (which I represent) five fishing platforms were built to protect the lakeshore and give anglers good access for fishing, as the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife plants rainbow trout there every year. Not only does the lake provide wildlife habitat, but the surrounding wetland and little ponderosa pine forest add welcome diversity. It's not unusual to spy a few mule deer in the forested area, or a wily coyote on the sage-covered hillside.

Lakes, ponds, and other riparian areas are especially attractive to migrating birds. The park and surrounding shrub-steppe habitat provided nesting for many species in spring and summer, but now those birds have moved on, and others from further north are passing through. As I walked around the lake it was clear that many of the birds were enjoying the lingering hawthorn berries, wormy apples, languid insects and left-over seeds. The importance of having a "rest-stop" for these migrants is paramount to their survival.

While there, I was able to record the birds I saw on my phone app for eBird. This free app was built by Cornell University in New York, and is used by almost half a million people around the world. Cornell uses this citizen science to study bird populations and movements. We birders can in turn use the data to find birds in our area and when best to see them. Helen McCabe State Park is listed as a birding "Hot-Spot," and 125 species of birds have been recorded there. Pretty impressive considering in the whole county the total number of species is 293.

Today was typical for a late fall day, 16 species of birds counted on my short hike. Waterfowl were resting on the lake and small mixed-species flocks of songbirds were busy foraging through the shrubbery and trees. In the spring most songbirds (Passerines) are busy defending territory, building nests, and feeding their young. But when fall arrives they often can be found in these mixed-species flocks. Safety in numbers I suppose. Above me three red-tailed hawks soared. Two of the raptors were adults, their rusty-red tails easy to spot. The third had not yet molted its brown-banded tail, it was a juvenile and will attain its adult plumage next spring. Some bird species will continue to head south, while others are residents that stay and tough it out through the winter.

So I will keep coming back to the lake and surrounding shrub-steppe, always on the lookout for a new rare species of bird and yet just as happy with the most common I usually find.

If you would like to learn more about birds and other wildlife around Helen McCabe State Park and shrub-steppe habitat come join KEEN for their annual "Birdfest" and "Get Intimate with the Shrub-steppe" festivals held jointly in 2020 on Mother's Day weekend (May 8, 9 and 10). There will be many experts on hand leading field trips around both the lake and down river at the BLM Umtanum Site, plus on-site demonstrations and activities. Go to [www.kittasee.org](http://www.kittasee.org) for exciting details.