

The oxbow wetland of the Yakima River at West Richland, Washington State

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The wetland is observable from North Canal Drive about 400 metres south of the bridged junction of Grosscup Boulevard, Grosscup Road, and North Pederson Road in West Richland, WA, USA. Canal Drive going southeast follows the Columbia Canal¹ on its left bank. I was there for a short stay in the second week of June in 2023.

The wetland appears to be part of an abandoned meander of the Yakima River, which is off to the east. It was probably

once a slough or oxbow lake but is now heavily silted to become a shallow-water wetland with extensive aquatic vegetation.

Without local knowledge the shoreline is virtually inaccessible, which greatly enhances it as a refuge for wildlife, bounded on the Canal-Drive side by a ten-metre-high steep bluff with dense trees and tall shrubs, and on the opposite side by agricultural land with no public access.



¹ So-called because it leaves the Yakima River at Horn Rapids Dam and flows down through Richland and Kennewick, eventually, if it gets that far, joining the Columbia River downstream of the Yakima River confluence as Columbia Canal No.3.

Looking downstream through a small gap in the trees from the observation point. The common vegetation is sedges.

The area is heavily populated with red-winged blackbirds..





This time of year there's very little open water, most of what would be open is covered with a light-green floating aquatic, which I guess to be duckweed (*Lemna* sp.).



Male red-wings are easy to recognize both by their epaulettes and their constant reminder that the capital of Somalia is "mog-a-dish-u".

Females look like another species. They're quite different with a sparrow-like plumage, a bit smaller, and are quieter than males.

It is possible to observe ducks with fledglings without distressing them too much if, as always, you keep your movements to a minimum, and remember, if you can clearly see the ducks, then the ducks can easily see you because you're standing on their skyline.

The two species of ducks that I saw were mallards (male and female, *Anas platyrhynchos*) and wood ducks (females only, *Aix sponsa*).



Family outing. Mallards. Although blue speculum and dark-mottled-orange bill not easy to see in this lighting, the mother's "quack-quack" was easy to hear. Males around.



Another family outing. Wood ducks. They usually nest in tree cavities. No sign of any males.



An interesting gathering. Two mallard drakes, possibly at the early stage of a post-breeding moult; one wood-duck hen; a youngster, likely with at least one mallard parent; and some turtles. The scene seems to be set in what might have been a nest.

Also seen a colony of swallows possibly with nests under the near-by bridge across the Columbia Canal.²

Cannot be certain of species, but I would say cliff swallows.³

² If there, nests are hidden behind the structure of the bridge, and there are no safe water-level viewpoints on the canal's steep sides.

³ White underside, reddish rump at the base of the tail, not barn swallows. Impossible to get even a blurry photograph they were all flying around so fast.



Turtles were (for me) an unexpected sight. The only species I am aware of, no more than that, is the western painted turtle (*Chrysemys picta* ssp. *bellii*) to be found in Buttertubs Marsh in Nanaimo, Vancouver Island, BC.

Naively hoping to identify these by thumbing through dozens of pictures of species and ignoring those not native to southeastern Washington, I concluded that these too were painted turtles. However, as Terese Meyer of North West Tortoise pointed out:

“All over the Tri-Cities we have established invasive wild species of turtles. Most are red-eared sliders or [river] cooters, but there are some painted turtles. All of these species came from the pet industry. Red-eared sliders came from Europe in the 1920s and now have established populations in 48 states.”⁴

I'll stick with my guess and say they were indigenous painted turtles, just don't quote me. ◇



Notes taken on a family visit to celebrate eldest granddaughter's graduation from high school, 2023/06/09.

⁴ Red-eared sliders have also been seen in Buttertubs Marsh, Stephanie Thorp, VIU post. Cooters are from eastern North America.