



A huge flock of swans and snow geese in Skagit Valley, Wash. (Echo Liu/The Epoch Times)

#### NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

## Migratory Birds Bring Opportunity, Environmental Concerns to Washingtonians

BY ECHO LIU | April 2, 2021 Updated: April 5, 2021

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SKAGIT VALLEY, Wash.—In Washington State, one of the greatest natural wonders is the annual return and departure of migratory [birds](#).

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However, the birds' yearly departure in spring not only brings bird watchers (also known as birders) but also creates issues for local farmers and the natural [environment](#).

Skagit Valley lies in northwestern Washington, a little over an hour north of Seattle. Each spring, huge flocks comprised of tens of thousands of migratory birds depart against the backdrop of snowy mountains and hundreds of acres of blooming farmland.

Geese, swans, and other waterfowl travel 3,000 miles from this scenic valley to Wrangel Island, the most northeastern island in Russia.

Many visitors from near and far come to see the birds in their natural habitat. Locals have found ways to profit from that.

Andrew Miller is the founder and CEO of Spinach Bus Ventures. With an MBA and background in law, Miller is confident these migratory birds can have a positive economic impact.

“Bird watching is the fastest growing nature-based activity in the United States. So there’s economic opportunity in that, and bringing people in,” Miller told The Epoch Times.



## Crop Destruction

However, as a partner and farmer of Tulip Town, Miller also voiced concern. At Tulip Town, he grows 30 acres of tulips along with other crops.

He said that if 20,000 birds land on farmland and feed on the crops, “that’s [a] considerable economic loss for that farmer.”

That’s exactly what happened to Miller himself. However, he laughed about it and looked at the positive outcome, saying it saved him the labor for a harvest.

But not all farmers have the same outlook as Miller.

As a result, many farmers don’t grow winter crops due to the destruction the migratory birds’ appetites bring. Some farmers take other measures, like putting up fake eagles in the field to scare away the birds.

Dairy farms have the greatest concern, as large amounts of bird droppings can cause hygiene problems for the cows.

Miller and his business partners are all native Skagitonians who have a deep love for their home valley. They have been working to figure out a win-win solution for the local farmers and businesses that rely on visitors.

He said, “We ought to be able to compensate the farmers for any crop loss that’s due to the birds.”



Jed Holmes, supervisor, Skagit Conservation District. (Photo courtesy of Jed Holmes)

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## Fragile Habitat

Farmers are not the only ones who have concerns about the bird population.

Jed Holmes is the supervisor of the Skagit Conservation District. Holmes works with landowners and farmers, helping them to preserve resources and farms sustainably.

Holmes also has noticed issues with the birds.

“When the numbers get above a certain level, it’s no longer sustainable,” he told The Epoch Times.

He said natural habitat or farmland is fragile. The birds’ feeding and nesting habits can severely disturb the ecosystem.



In that event, the land may not grow back to its original state for roughly 15 years, Holmes said.

“I am concerned that at some point, there will be habitat degradation, and so [we] just have to keep an eye on that,” he said.

The conservationist said the estimated number of birds could be over 150,000 within 50 miles around Skagit Valley. So far, there has only been minor damage to the farmers’ fields.

“We haven’t seen the numbers get so high that we’re seeing habitat being degraded,” Holmes said.

He mentioned that a solution the locals adopted to control the population was to invite licensed hunters from across North America to the area during the hunting season.



Swans and ducks in Skagit Valley, Wash. (Echo Liu/The Epoch Times)

## Natural Beauty

Holmes hopes to find a balanced outcome for locals, the land, and birds alike. He works with a group of people to embrace economic opportunity, protect both the land and farmers, and educate visitors. He is also the co-founder of Birds of Winter.

Another member of that group is Stephanie Fernandez. She is a tour operator in Skagit Valley and is the founder of Skagit Guided Adventures.

She spends much of her time outside and encourages others to view the natural beauty of the area.

“Nature rewires the spirit, so I love seeing people out in nature,” she told The Epoch Times.



Stephanie Fernandez, tour operator of Skagit Guided Adventures, on March 13, 2021. (Echo Liu/The Epoch Times)

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Fernandez is also a bird enthusiast. Even after seeing the flocks of birds year after year, her eyes still go wide and light up when she catches a glimpse of them taking off in huge numbers.

“They speak Russian,” she said wryly while the birds honked around her.

Fernandez believes that while people enjoy the beauty of nature and wildlife, they are obligated to protect them.

“Migratory birds have a very short period of time to feed and gain enough reserves for their enormous migrations north,” Fernandez said.

“It makes me sad to watch people be disrespectful of the birds by getting too close to them and scaring them away,” she said. “It is also frustrating to watch people walk out on the farm fields, which are private property and very important areas for the birds, especially the geese and the swans.”

The issue of access also bothers farmers, such as Miller.

Fernandez believes educational campaigns could help improve the situation. She’s been educating people about nature during her 30-plus years of eco-tour guiding.

“One of the things I like to teach during my birding tours is how to be a responsible birder,” she said.



Snow geese with Mt. Baker in the background. (Photo courtesy of Stephanie Fernandez, Skagit Guided Adventures)

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Fernandez listed some basic guidelines on how to respect the birds.

“Keep your distance to birds. Also, you need to respect their habitat they’re in, because habitats can be very fragile, or habitat can be a private land like these farmlands, their private property. It’s not a park,” she said.

At times, she goes out of her way to stop birders from walking on natural habitat or private property. Some birders have said they didn’t see any signs that indicated private property or natural habitat.

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife is responsible for keeping signs up in the area.



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The Epoch Times contacted Fenner Yarborough, the Wildlife Regional Program Manager, who responded that they have signs in the majority of their fields showing where the public vs. private property boundaries are. Yarborough also said the Department owns multiple properties where wildlife viewers can explore and walk.

The Skagit Valley will likely continue to see flocks arriving and departing for many years to come. Holmes said that if we take a step further to do a little more, our kids can probably still enjoy the natural beauty that we enjoy today.

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