

The

AVOCET

Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society

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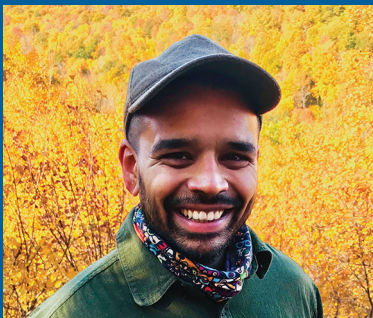


Monthly Speaker Series

SAHAS BARVE

THE ACORN
WOODPECKER PARADOX

Wed, January 20 at 7 pm
via Zoom



Do Acorn Woodpeckers make granaries or do granaries make Acorn Woodpeckers? We will plunge into their complicated social lives—how they build granaries and what they will do to win access to a big granary. Sahas is from Mumbai, India and is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History.

More details at
scvas.org/SpeakerSeries

Going Home Again

Matthew Dodder, Executive Director

Not everyone is 57 years old. Many are older and have seen a lot more. Many younger who have seen a little less. But I can say from where I stand that I have never experienced the repeated slingshot of emotions I have this past year. I expect that's universal though, no matter how old you are. For me, I was catapulted from the pure joy of my first year in this position, and seeing my lifer Flammulated Owl, to the almost unbearable weight of COVID and not being with my family—those living and those not—and the sadness of seeing friends out of work, wondering if they could find something new when no one was hiring. Then the arrival of slightly cooler weather, and joy of getting reacquainted with all the birds that go somewhere else during spring and summer, and then back again with the stress and rancor of a divisive election. In other words, it's been both wonderful, and horrible, but the world will indeed continue. Something will come next—good or bad—and when it does, we will learn what we have *learned*. We'll discover a reason to be thankful for this brand new changed world. We simply must.

Here are some suggestions. We've learned the value of being close to home. We've experienced the joy of a Hermit Thrush when seen through a bedroom window, a Varied Thrush's haunting song, and that birding alone can have its advantages. We still love the opportunity to share information with birders we meet, but have learned how to stay 6' apart and speak clearly through a mask. We've learned the importance of letter writing, friendly phone calls, human kindness and our need of fresh air. We've gazed on the smoky orange light that comes from everywhere in particular, and wondered how it can be beautiful at

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Continued from cover

the same time it is not? We've considered the resilience of chaparral and redwoods. We've improved our birding skills, and our cooking—refined by the need for personal distance, canceled trips, and shuttered restaurants. We've learned how to build personal blogs, make (and edit) YouTube videos, hold Zoom birthday parties, and how to feel comfortable with a little less formality, because we're tired of all that, and it's not really the time to be business-y. We've read more than ever, and avoided physical contact with others for too long. We've seen how important it is to be human and warm—even if we can't hug our friends and family or blow out the candles on that cake the way we used to. We've discovered how to keep ourselves close to others—from too far away.

This will undoubtedly sound unbecoming of the office to some. We are an Audubon chapter after all, and a very old one at that. Why all this talk about feelings? We are devoted to the love of birds, conserving habitat and resources, environmental advocacy and wildlife education. But more importantly, we are a community. At our best, we care about each other *and* the natural world equally. We will always be better that way.

Hopefully, we are now, or soon will be at least, *going back home*. But as Thomas Wolfe suggested in 1940, it will not be the same. We are tempted to imagine field trips the way they used to be. Classrooms, countdown dinners, committee meetings and all the like. We imagine friends, and dinners, and hugs—so many hugs. So we will need every bit of knowledge we've acquired during this crazy 20-20. There is an ironic reference to perfect vision there that could hardly be more appropriate as we ease ourselves back into normalcy. But that *normal* will be new, and changed. Like the many non-human life forms we study, we will have to adapt. And hopefully, it will be worth the effort it has taken.

Specifically, I want to celebrate the powerful creative ideas offered by so many volunteers, which made our first-ever online annual meeting the success it was. I also believe our debut video festival was a surprising success, thanks to a hundred community members working to make it what it needed to be. As well, last spring's Birdathon, and the upcoming Christmas Bird Count have been completely reimaged, thanks again to combined acquired knowledge from recent experience. Our nature shop, our Wetlands Discovery Program, our Silent Auction. The list goes on... is there *anything* that hasn't been changed, perhaps even enhanced this past year? I propose the one thing unchanged is the strength and dedication of our community, only now, it is so much more obvious how we rely on it. Oh, and we still care about birds, a lot! ●



Stevens Creek
Matthew Dodder

WE'RE NOW ON INSTAGRAM

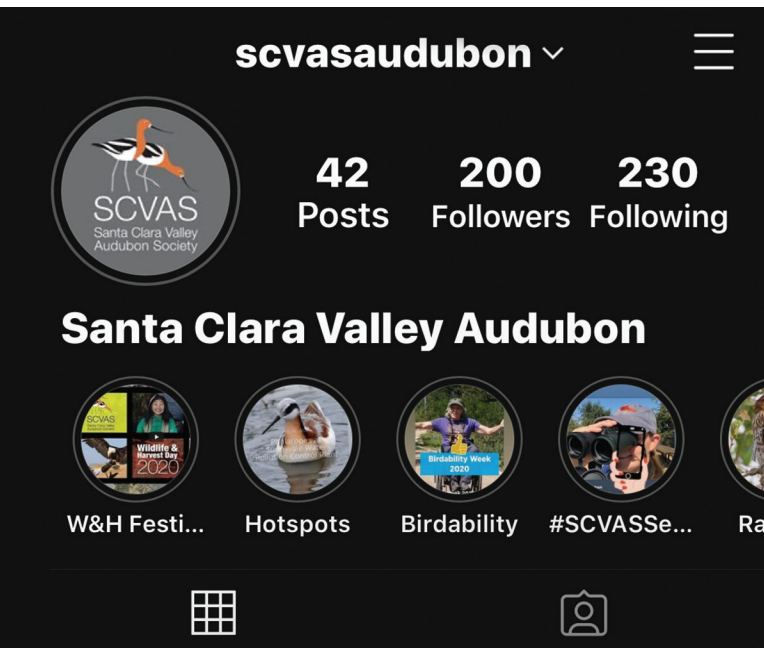


@scvasaudubon

One summer afternoon, volunteer field trip leaders Laura Coatney and Dani Christensen met for a socially-distanced bird walk at Bedwell Bayfront Park in Menlo Park. In the wake of fellow birder Christian Cooper's racist encounter in Central Park, George Floyd's killing in Minneapolis, and the subsequent resurgence of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, they had more than birds on their mind, and discussed what they could do to make their birding community more inclusive. They had personally been participating in social media campaigns on *Instagram* such as #BlackBirdersWeek, #BlackAFinSTEM, and others, but wondered how they could bring their beloved local Audubon chapter into the fold.

As a non-profit conservation organization in the heart of Silicon Valley, SCVAS had no presence yet on the major social media platform, *Instagram*. As a place where mostly younger folks are sharing important ideas and issues, both women realized that in order for SCVAS to reach a younger and more diverse generation of people, they needed to join the conversation! Laura soon joined the Outreach Committee and pitched the idea, and brought in Dani to bring the idea to life.

"Insta" is an environment where social and environmental justice movements thrive. It's a youthful, fun, and



WAIT, WHAT'S AN INSTAGRAM?

Ginger Langdon-Lassagne, Innocent Bystander

It's time to answer that burning question at the forefront of everyone's mind: what is an *Instagram* and why does SCVAS have one now?

First, a bit of background for those unfamiliar with the platform itself. Most everyone is at least aware of the existence of Facebook, the social media behemoth that dominates so much community interaction on the internet. *Instagram* (originally its own company, but now wholly owned by Facebook, Inc.) is also a form of social media. It is designed for sharing photos and videos, usually with some text explanation below the picture. It's primarily used on mobile phones via the *Instagram* app, but it can also be accessed from a desktop or laptop computer via an internet browser. [instagram.com/scvasaudubon/](https://www.instagram.com/scvasaudubon/)

Unfortunately, in a major shift of the original *Instagram* policy, Facebook now requires one to create an *Instagram* account to view content on the site. The account is free, and can be empty of personal information and photos, but nevertheless, it is a barrier. (Personally, I detest this, but I'm a dyed-in-the-wool privacy nut, so that's my "issues" showing.)

But why bother with an *Instagram* account? Simply put, the visual display of information is a powerful tool for communication, and also, birds are beautiful! The photos taken by our members and staff are often featured on our *Instagram* page. With an *Instagram* account, we can communicate with a wider variety of people of various ages and connect with like-minded conservation organizations across our geographic region. We can "cross-pollinate" by announcing our own events and activities and sharing the events and activities sponsored by other groups such as Saved By Nature, Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District, San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory, and Bay Area Bird Photographers. We can even connect on the national level with places like the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and, of course, the National Audubon Society.

Our *Instagram* content is curated and uploaded by a marvelous pair of volunteers, Dani Christensen and Laura Coatney. They deserve enormous thanks for their hard work and expertise on the job! They officially launched the SCVAS site on September 18th, and in just that short span of time, they've garnered a following of 184 accounts!

Best of all, the photos and videos are such a joy to behold. Beautiful local birds seen in their natural setting can be a small dose of nature on your phone or computer screen, on a busy day when you can't get out to the wilds in person. Come join the fun! ●

engaging space where users share primarily images and videos. Laura and Dani aim to create a space for SCVAS to reach a new generation of birders, educators, and conservationists of all backgrounds and abilities.

SCVAS has been on *Instagram* since early September, creating relationships with our followers and other organizations that work toward inclusivity and conservation. They were recently busy promoting Birdability Week, a national campaign to highlight challenges that people with limited mobility or energy face when birding. They also post information about upcoming events, members' bird photography, birding hotspots, rare and favorite bird sightings, and community science projects, so you can stay up to date on what SCVAS and our partners are up to! It's a place to find out what's going on in your neighborhood, your county, and the birding community as a whole.

Check it out at [instagram.com/scvasaudubon](https://www.instagram.com/scvasaudubon) or on the app @scvasaudubon

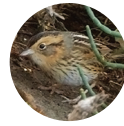
Dani Christensen & Laura Coatney
Volunteers & Social Media Influencers



Though the weather may not feel like fall yet here in the South Bay, the birds of fall and winter are arriving. Migrating songbirds like Yellow Warblers are moving through the area to their wintering grounds, and birds like the White-Crowned Sparrow are here to stay through winter. Your local patch or backyard may be changing before your eyes!

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Matthew Dodder
Executive Director



Element of Surprise

It may not be entirely accurate, but it's always felt to me that our winter, when the Northern Hemisphere tilts away from the sun, holds more bird surprises than other seasons. It could simply be that with the relative absence of song and hot sun, or the generally quieter woodlands, the uncommon birds that do appear just feel more out of place than the birds of spring or fall—like sudden bright things in an otherwise gray field of drab, these birds stand out and makes us stop breathing for a moment.

One in a Million

Take, for example, the Eurasian Wigeon. A stunningly beautiful Duck. As the name suggests its expected range is in the Old World. Our west coast birds likely arrive from Russia and instead of flying south to Japan and China, they fly to our west coast. This may be mirror-misorientation, but as suggested in the Fall installment of W2L4, that may not be due to anything resembling a mistake. There are enough Eurasian Wigeons in fact (seemingly more every year) that sprinkle themselves among the thousands of American Wigeons in the Central Valley (and even on our local ponds), that their appearance begins to look like a deliberate frontier movement. Finding a male Eurasian Wigeon is now fairly easy if you thoroughly scan through a raft of Americans. The Eurasian Wigeons even sound different than Americans so if your ears are good, listen for their one-syllable whistle, as opposed to the muffled two-syllable laugh of the American. But good luck finding a female... they look a lot like female Americans... hmmm, makes me think we may actually be missing a full half of the Eurasian Wigeons in our area! Might be a good time to study the differences.

Hidden Drama

I remember taking my parents out to the Palo Alto Baylands or the Flood Control Basin in the afternoon every Christmas Day. I'd set up the scope and we'd take turns looking at the groups of Canvasback (my father's favorite Duck) and we'd search for the one or two Redhead that might be hiding in the raft. In the 1980s it was a challenge to find them, at least it was for us. Now I frequently find larger groups, sometimes in the hundreds at Salt Pond A1 north of Shoreline Lake, along the Bay Trail or in the Sunnyvale Ponds. Have they become more common in the last 40 years, or are we just getting better at finding them? Whatever the reason, I'm

always so happy to find them—their brighter red and more rounded head, their darker gray back, paler bill, and startling orange eye. The females are subtle and beautifully difficult to recognize. I take great satisfaction in finding the Redhead among the Canvasbacks and enjoy knowing a little bit about their practice of depositing their eggs in the Canvasback's nest... The species are cast together in an eternal theater.

You don't see me

The classic winter surprise is when one strolls along a creek, like at Los Gatos Creek Park, or Vasona Lake, or Charleston Slough. While casually scanning the quiet edges of the water, out of the confusion of flattened grass and leaves, a cryptic, elaborately striped pattern catches your eye and you pause. You notice it is attached to a rather small stationary bird with a ridiculously long bill. Almost invisible unless you know it's there, the Wilson's Snipe then does one of two things: it either remains completely still, pretending it doesn't exist, or explodes into a zigzagging flight and quickly drops back into the reeds out of view! A remarkable bird one can hardly imagine more beautiful and detailed than when it is seen at close range.

Other wetland species share the Snipe's aversion to being seen—Swamp Sparrow and the nearly mythic Nelson's Sparrow to name two. Both can be found in our salt marsh habitats. They prefer to stay out of view but they will tolerate your attention for a moment or two. Being observed is positively anathema to most of our Rails however. They are most successfully found during the King Tides of early winter when the rising water pushes them out of hiding. Ridgway's Rail is our local specialty, and is most easily seen from the boardwalk at Palo Alto Baylands. A good Rail day in winter will produce Virginia Rail and Sora as well. But it has to be a truly amazing day to see a Black Rail—something I remember crawling on my hands and knees through the mud and rain for a quick eye-to-eye view of in January '81.

Take *that*, Blackburnian!

Not every winter surprise is rare though. Townsend's Warbler is a rather common bird during our Northern California winter. It's a western specialty and a bird that rivals any eastern

Photos L to R:
Red-breasted Sapsucker, Wilson's Snipe, Ridgway's Rail,
Yellow-rumped Warbler, Nelson's Sparrow *Tom Grey*



Townsend's Warbler
Tom Grey



Ferruginous Hawk
Tom Grey



Eurasian Wigeon
Tom Grey

Parulid in its beauty. Unlike the Yellow-rumped Warbler, it's stunning and colorful year-round. It is included here, not because it is rare, but because it often accompanies the throngs of Yellow-rumps that we find as soon as we step outside. Literally, as soon as I open my front door or window I hear the loud "swick!" of a nearby Yellow-rump. It's the constant soundtrack for winter. If I wait a moment or two more, perhaps a full minute, I'll eventually hear the higher and softer, almost kissy "tink" of a Townsend's Warbler. That moment makes me smile with satisfaction because that one additional moment of my attention was rewarded with another one of our winter surprises. Perhaps if I stood in my door a little longer, something else would make itself known...

Red in Beak and Claw

Every season has its particular flavor of Hawk. In spring we have the arrival of Swainson's Hawks from South America that have come to breed again in Coyote Valley after decades away. Fall has an infusion of Hawks on the move through our area, including the occasional Broad-winged Hawk which flies south to winter in the tropics. And in winter we have Ferruginous Hawk. A magnificent, large Buteo that arrives from the short grasslands of southern Canada and our prairie states. It's long, pale wings and oxidized coloration give it an almost ghost-like appearance as it circles with the more common Red-tailed Hawks. If one happens to perch on a post, or even on the ground, the predictable reaction is astonishment at how white it looks. Closer examination reveals fabulous rusty details that weave and wrap across its back. Of course, there's a dark morph too—entirely chocolate except for the white flight feathers. It's a looker alright! Search the valley, the rolling grassy hills, and the great big sky for this stupendous winter bird.

The Sapsuckers are only here in the cooler months. They first arrived in early October and will remain through the winter. I find them fascinating because they never look quite like the field guides. A full discussion of their identification deserves a separate article, but I will say this: when you see those white stripes on the wing, the ones that parallel the back of the perched bird, pay attention. We get three species in this area, and it seems with each year we get just a little better at separating them—as well as a little more confused. Make note of the color of the throat, the auricular, the nape. Better yet, take a photo because unfortunately, unless you are looking at a textbook example of a male, they are not always easy to separate. Hybrids are common too, just to make things more interesting.

During winter, there are so many possible surprises, as well as many predictable encounters. Spend these dwindling daylight hours searching for either the rare-and-surprising, or the familiar and I-was-hoping-to-see-you-agains. I expect you'll be home in time for dinner... since the sun goes down at five. ●

I'm a dedicated FeederWatcher. Each winter, I hang up my feeders and eagerly await the arrival of birds to count. Will all of the usual suspects show up? Will I have any new visitors this season?

Over the course of the winter, I track chickadees, titmice, and nuthatches; juncos, towhees, and crowned sparrows. I record surges and dips in finch numbers. Jays stop by, doves forage, and occasionally a woodpecker shows up to sample suet. One year, siskins passed through (very exciting!). A Townsend's Warbler, a petite and colorful masked bandit of a bird, was a daily visitor for months last winter. I report these sightings to *FeederWatch*—and love every minute I spend with the birds.

If you're a backyard birdwatcher—or just intrigued by the idea of getting to know your local birds—you can join *FeederWatch* this winter and help out the birds.

What is FeederWatch?

Project FeederWatch is a citizen science project about the birds that you see in winter. Every year during the colder months, FeederWatchers across the U.S. and Canada count the birds they see outside their windows and report their counts to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Data from *FeederWatch* are used by scientists to better understand where some of our most common bird species are—and aren't—found, and how that's changing over time.

While many FeederWatchers have bird feeders, you don't need them to participate—you can simply count the birds that you see in your yard or from your window. Pick a count location that works for you—at home, at work, at school, any area you can regularly watch during the winter. Once you choose your site, you'll do all your counts there.

The schedule and duration of each count are up to you. You can record data weekly if you want to, or do only a few counts throughout the season. In fact, if you count only two or three times during the winter, for as little as fifteen minutes per count, the data you collect are still useful to science.

This winter, *FeederWatch* started in mid-November and ends in April. You can join *FeederWatch* at any time during the season—joining now still gives you plenty of time to watch birds and contribute data.



Oak Titmouse
Hita Bambhaniya-Modha

Why feed birds in winter?

I recently interviewed Dr. Emma Greig, the U.S. Project Leader for *FeederWatch* at the Cornell Lab, about the benefits of bird feeding and what we've learned from *FeederWatch*.

"One of the biggest questions that always comes up is what is the impact of supplementary feeding on birds," Greig says. The answer? "Winter bird feeding can keep birds alive," she says. When temperatures drop in winter, food is less plentiful, and studies have shown that bird feeders can increase birds' chances of survival.

In addition, a recent study from Sweden shows that feeders can be especially helpful to female birds, which are subordinate to males when it comes to access to food. Females that get extra food in winter don't drop their body temperatures as much at night as those that don't get supplemental food, and their survival rate improves.

How does FeederWatch help?

Information collected by FeederWatchers helps scientists understand trends in North American bird populations. About 30 scientific papers have come from study of the data, with findings about invasive species, irruptive movements, climate, and habitat use.

A major theme of the research findings is that there is a connection between climate and where birds are and

aren't found. For example, as places get warmer, more warm-adapted species are being reported in these locations. Range expansions and contractions are occurring, and this trend is visible in our yards. Climate change is "really having an impact on the creatures around us," says Greig.

FeederWatch data have led to a fascinating discovery about Anna's Hummingbirds on the West Coast: the birds have been extending their range northward, and this expansion is linked to feeders. Anna's can now be found all the way up to Alaska, and the further north you go, the more the bird is associated with people. There are fewer Anna's overall in northern regions—but northern FeederWatchers that report seeing them also see the birds more often than FeederWatchers further south.

The frequency with which Anna's Hummingbirds are reported in the north suggests that the birds are using feeders more regularly there to make it through the winter. The data also show that human behavior has changed, and that people in the north are putting out more hummingbird feeders. "Hummingbirds and people are both changing," says Greig, and we can't separate cause from effect.

These discoveries show the "value of repeated observations from the same place," Greig says. "You can't get this kind of storytelling from just a single count."

Future directions

Greig hopes that more people will participate in *FeederWatch*, regardless of whether they have feeders. In fact, it would be valuable to have data from people who don't have feeders in their yards, or from those who don't have yards. "All you

really need is a space that you can look at," says Greig, like a garden, or the courtyard of an apartment complex. "Maybe all you ever see are pigeons and house sparrows—that's okay, we want to understand that that's where those birds are. That's extremely useful data."

Why join FeederWatch?

Participation in *FeederWatch* has benefits in addition to helping science.

If you are new to birdwatching, *FeederWatch* is a fun way to learn about some of the common birds you see each day. Don't worry about bird identification—there are plenty of resources to help you (see our list below). There also aren't a lot of birds that you'll need to know—in my experience, there are about a dozen usual species in most yards. "Just do the best you can," says Greig, and don't let it stress you.

For new and experienced birders alike, *FeederWatch* is an enjoyable way to hone your observation skills and get to know some of your closest neighbors—the birds that are right outside your window—even better. Just by watching, you'll discover birds' foraging strategies, their pecking order (pun intended!), and other typical behaviors.

Finally, by giving birds your close attention, you "can't help but feel more connected and aware of nature," says Greig. This connection is good for your well-being, and bodes well for the rest of the natural world too. "The more people are connected with nature, maybe the more thoughtful they are about the decisions they make" that affect the environment, Greig says. "That connection is valuable to nature and to the world." ●



White-breasted Nuthatch
Brooke Miller

BACKYARD RESOURCES

Join FeederWatch

www.feederwatch.org

Our Website

Backyard Bird of the Month, Notes & Tips from a Backyard Birder, and more on common yard birds in our county
www.scvas.org/backyard-birding

Our Nature Shop

For a selection of bird feeders & bird food

Have Questions? backyardbirds@scvas.org



Conservation Corner

Shani Kleinhaus
Environmental Advocate

Advocacy efforts and campaigns take a very long time, and several of our 2020 engagements are nearing significant milestones or are expected to conclude this winter. We are currently looking for volunteers to help us advocate for birds and nature in our communities. To learn more about volunteering, please contact shani@scvas.org.

Bird-Safe Design & Dark Skies

Collisions with glass windows, building facades and other structural elements cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of birds every year. Artificial light at night exacerbates this problem. To help reduce collisions, we continue to advocate in **Cupertino** for *Bird-Safe Design and Dark Sky* ordinances. We hope that by the time the Winter *Avocet* is published, these ordinances will be adopted by the Cupertino City Council. Similarly in **San Jose**, we hope that the *v* will provide strong protections for birds. Hopefully, we will have good news to share at the close of the year.

Coyote Valley

Our decades-long efforts to protect the entire 7400-acre **Coyote Valley** are moving forwards as the City of San Jose explores protections from urbanization and sprawl as part of the Envision San José 2040 General Plan four-year review. In this process, the City has incorporated many of our suggested Amendments to the General Plan. If adopted by Council, the amendments will:

- ▶ Reallocate all 35,000 planned jobs from North Coyote to other areas in San José. North Coyote Valley will no longer be considered an Employment Lands Growth Area in the General Plan
- ▶ Change the land use designations of the 937 acres in North Coyote that were purchased earlier this year for preservation from Industrial Park to Open Space, Parklands and Habitat
- ▶ Change the land use designations of other undeveloped properties in North Coyote Valley from Industrial Park to Agriculture (with the exception of Gavilan College Coyote Valley Center)



- ▶ Explore a credits program to support further conservation actions in Coyote Valley and facilitate development in urbanized areas of San Jose
- ▶ Create a new Coyote Valley Agriculture Overlay that increases the minimum lot size from 20 acres to 40 acres on some agricultural properties
- ▶ and more...

If these recommendations are adopted by Council, natural and working lands will be protected, and the Open Space Authority can start working on long-term restoration of wildlife (including bird) habitat and on regenerative agriculture in the valley.

Creekside Trails

Riparian ecosystems are some of the rarest habitat types in North America and are also some of the most critical for wildlife. About 80% of all animals use riparian resources and habitats at some life stage, and more than 50% of breeding birds nest chiefly in riparian habitats. Because they provide connectivity between habitats and across elevational zones, the importance of riparian ecosystems as movement linkages is critically important to wildlife populations, and their importance is expected to increase with time to allow species to respond and adapt to climate change.

Studies show that human activity in riparian areas, including walking and biking on trails, has a negative effect on local wildlife and on bird nesting activity. And as the human population in Santa Clara Valley has increased, the demand for recreation and commuter trails has increased as well. Creekside trails have become ubiquitous, and planning continues for creekside trails on almost every river or tributary in the County.



Coyote Valley
Matthew Dodder



Stevens Creek
Matthew Dodder

We all love access to nature, and we use trails that provide access for observing and photographing birds. But we must also consider that our desire for recreational access to creeks and open spaces can fragment wildlife habitat and stress the diminishing quantity and quality of resources that bird and wildlife populations require for subsistence and reproduction. And while some trails leave space for wildlife to roam, others have fragmented habitat and restricted wildlife movement.

SCVAS and several other environmental organizations have been advocating with the County, cities and Valley Water for a long time. We asked Valley Water to provide focal areas for access, rather than paved multi-use trails that run along the creeks. We hear that Valley Water is working on policy, and hope it protects the most sensitive areas from human intrusion.

Almaden Office Project

In *San Jose*, we follow several projects along the Guadalupe River and Los Gatos Creek. We submitted elaborate comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) for the *Almaden Office Project on the bank of the Guadalupe River*, across the river from the Children's Discovery Museum. The project proposes two 16-story towers (283 feet tall) connected by a 4-story building. A 3-level underground garage is also proposed. This development is proposed with zero setback from the Guadalupe River corridor.

Rivers and streams meander. Natural processes remove sediment from one side of the river, and deposit it on the other, creating erosion and meanders. The Almaden Office Project is situated on a bend where Guadalupe River flows are already cutting into the bank. Development this close to the river will eventually require expensive erosion control. Sooner

or later, it will mandate the fortification of the creek banks at a great expense to the healthy riparian forest at the site and to taxpayers.

The meandering nature of streams and the importance of riparian corridors to our birds, fish and other wildlife is the reason why SCVAS and advocates focused on stream setback for decades. It is why, in the past decade, San Jose adopted a Creek Corridor Policy and joined as a partner in the Habitat Conservation Plan. These policies require a minimum 100-foot setback of development from major waterways. Yet the DEIR finds significant cumulative harm to biological resources of the river. The conflict with the requirements of the Habitat Conservation Plan is another significant unavoidable impact.

SCVAS will continue following the approval process for this project and advocate with Council members asking them to deny the project when it comes in front of them for decision. If this project moves ahead as proposed, decades of advocacy for waterways and riparian corridors will take a huge step back.

Good News for Open Space

Finally, we are extremely pleased that Measure T passed. The funds will allow the Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority to continue working to acquire, protect and restore natural and working lands in some of the loveliest areas of our County. ●

CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

Ann Hepenstal
Voluntaria Asombrosa

The annual Christmas Bird Count enlists tens of thousands of volunteers across the Americas to conduct a bird census. Many people participate in the Christmas Bird Count (CBC) year after year—for decades or even longer!

Citizen Science

The CBC data help Audubon scientists evaluate the long-term health and status of bird populations, work to protect birds and their habitat, and identify environmental issues and trends. Learn more at <http://bit.ly/CBC-A>.

Challenge

A CBC team counts the individual birds of all the bird species that they can find on Count Day in their assigned territory.

Adventure

During the CBC, teams go slowly and look carefully for birds, and often are excited to find birds not usually seen—sometimes even a rare bird or a bird not usually seen at that time of year or place.

Excuse to spend the whole day birding!

This is one day when you can procrastinate on doing laundry, cleaning the house, organizing household paperwork, etc., because—it's for science!

SCVAS organizes four Count Circles: *Palo Alto*, *San Jose*, *Mount Hamilton*, and *Calero-Morgan Hill*. Each 15-mile diameter Count Circle is organized into Regions/Sectors, and then into smaller territories to which the Count Circle organizer assigns the birders.

In a normal year, CBC teams range from two to six people in order to get multiple eyes out looking for the birds and collecting the data. CBC can be a great opportunity to bird with more experienced birders, improve your identification skills, and learn more about a birding spot. During regular times, many CBC teams welcome beginning birders to join

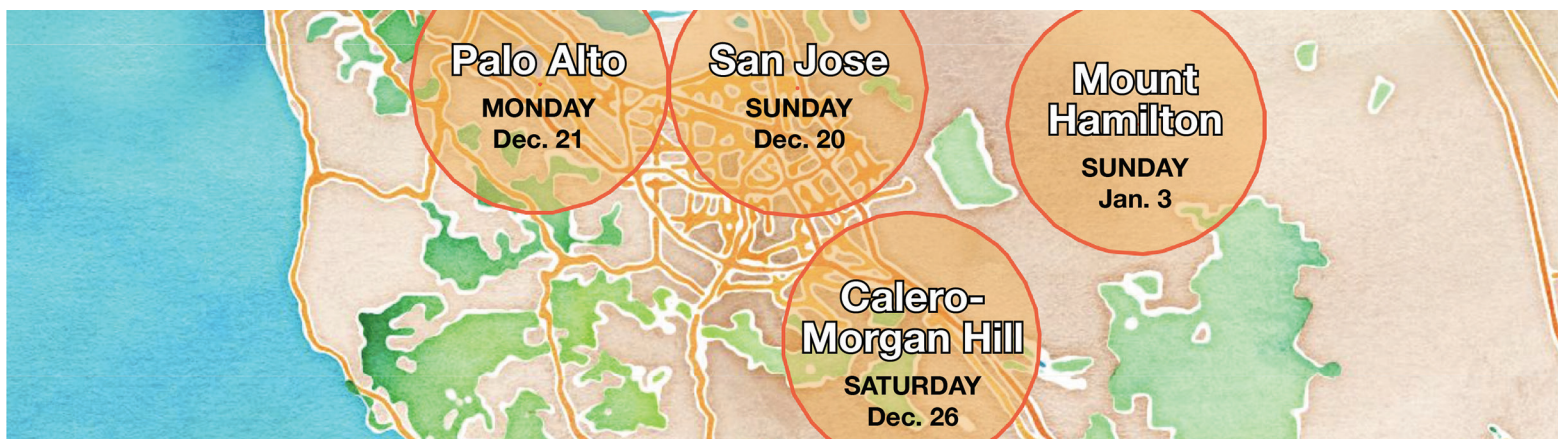
them and help with spotting and tallying. Some teams meet up year after year for CBC, even if they don't see each other in between CBCs!

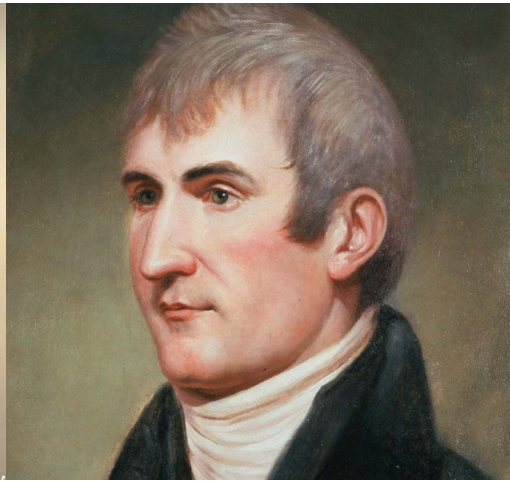
Our 2020 SCVAS CBC counts will implement safety protocols and may operate differently than in past years due to the COVID-19 public health emergency.

- ▶ **Reduce infection risk**
Wear a mask, bird in household groups, social distance. No carpooling. If you feel ill or show symptoms within 48 hours of your CBC, cancel and stay home.
- ▶ **Compile data remotely**
No Countdown dinners or in-person events.
- ▶ **Assess your CBC territory well before the Count Day**
Some places may be closed or have reduced access due to COVID-19 shutdowns, or recent wildfires. Respect local authorities and closures, and adjust your birding plans as necessary.
- ▶ **Follow guidance from your Count Circle coordinator**
This will be the most current and locally relevant information for your Count.

If you're a "CBC regular," you may have a CBC team or territory where you usually do CBC. You may have heard already from your CBC coordinator. If you're new to the CBC, you can reach out to the Count Circle leaders to find out ways to get involved. ●

Go to bit.ly/SCVAS-CBC for current information
Support our work If you can't count on CBC, please contribute! SCVAS welcomes your donations.





WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Hugh McDevitt
Civil War History Enthusiast

Descriptive, Archaic, and Eponymous Names of North American Birds

Yellow-rumped Warbler. White-crowned Sparrow. Ruby-crowned Kinglet. The return of these familiar passerines each fall marks the change of the seasons and a continuation of the yearly rhythm of our birding lives. The names of these birds help new birders to immediately associate the name with an important visual clue to their identities. (Well, except maybe the “ruby crown” of the Kinglet, which it flashes only occasionally). What about some of our other returnees like the Hermit Thrush that shows up in our backyard every October? Yes, it is solitary, but that doesn't give us the immediacy of a visual clue like “Yellow-Rump” (or the familiar nickname “Butter Butt”). And is the Hermit Thrush more or less solitary than its summer cousin the Swainson's Thrush? And, who or what is a Swainson?

Why do we give birds, or any living creatures, names? Naturalists have at least two personalities—the side that wants to study, describe, understand, and place things in sensible categories, and the side that wants to experience and enter into a relation with our environment. I think that bird names, both the common, vernacular names and the Linnean taxonomic names, speak more to our desire to describe and classify. However, I also find that names conjure internal images that tug at my spiritual or right-brain side. Thinking about my first and only sighting of a Snowy Owl in the Suisun Delta or my bucket-list desire to come across a Great Grey Owl in a Yosemite meadow at dusk fills me with a sense of wonder.

So, what's in a name? As I mentioned above, some names immediately describe physical characteristics of a bird. Some names describe habitat—Oak Titmouse, Willow Flycatcher. (And, by the way, splits can help and hurt bird naming. I'm

much happier to have Oak and Juniper Titmice than a Plain Titmouse. However, I would much prefer still having the Rufous-sided Towhee instead of our split Spotted Towhee.) However, even a descriptive name doesn't always help. Many of us had the opportunity recently to enjoy a couple of rare fall warblers at Vasona Lake County Park. Fortunately, the Bay-breasted Warbler still had enough rufous wash on the sides of its chest for the moniker to make sense. What about the Blackpoll Warbler foraging in a swampy area nearby? The name, though probably descriptive, didn't mean anything to me, so I was fortunate to be guided by other, more experienced birders in finding and identifying it. When I got home, I had to head to my dictionary (an obscure, large printed book that is a precursor to Wikipedia) to decipher the name. Black? Easy enough, but what is a “Blackpoll?” In addition to its political meanings, “poll” is also “the top or back of the head.” So, in addition to seeing a new bird, I also learned a new word to enthrall people at the next post-COVID cocktail party I attend. This bird could, I suppose, be called a Black-capped or Black-headed Warbler, but “Blackpoll” has a nice ring and made me think a little bit. (I guess I could also say that none of these names would have helped me to identify this bird in Basic plumage.)

We have names describing physical attributes, whether clear or not, whether in season or not, and names describing some portion of purported habitat. Other names describe location,

Continued on next page

Images L to R:
J. P. McCown,
Thick-billed Longspur Shawn Billerman,
Meriwether Lewis Portrait by Charles Willson Peale

Every once in a while we stumble upon an intriguing outdoor mystery—a feather, a footprint, a scrape. More rarely though, a question actually falls from the sky and presents itself to us like a child wanting candy...

This issue's feather was discovered by Carolyn Knight during a morning walk at Vasona Lake Park. She said she saw the bird fly directly overhead, and as it passed, this delicate clue separated itself from the bird and drifted to the ground a few feet away. She described it as having a very slight gray-blue cast along the narrow edge.

Answer will be posted in the next issue of *The Avocet*.

Books

Bird Feathers:
A Guide to North American Species
by S. David Scott & Casey McFarland

Websites

U.S. Fish & Wildlife's Feather Atlas
Slater Museum of Natural History's
Wing & Tail Image Collection

Note The collection or sale of feathers from native species is prohibited by law. If you find a feather, admire it and leave it behind.

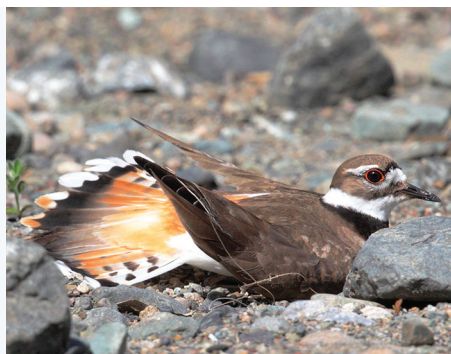


Mystery Feather
Carolyn Knight

Answer (FALL 2020)

The two feathers belonged to a **Killdeer**. The long feather was a primary from the right wing (P1?, right), and the second feather was the outer left tail (R6, left).

Photo: Tom Grey



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NAME *Continued from previous page*

or do they? The split of the old "Western" Flycatcher into Pacific-slope and Cordilleran Flycatchers gives those of us in California a slightly more specific location for *Empidonax difficilis*. The recent American Ornithological Society (AOS) lump of the Northwestern Crow back into the American Crow complex removed some helpful, although now irrelevant, location information from the name. The Tennessee Warbler can be found in migration in Tennessee, but spends most of its breeding time in Canada, and its winter range covers most of the Eastern United States up to the Rockies. Similarly, the Cape May Warbler is clearly not restricted to the world-famous birding locale on the New Jersey coast.

And, our last cocktail party word for this article: "eponymous," birds that have names of people attached to them—either the discoverer (maybe the first person to shoot the bird), or maybe a friend or relation or colleague of the discover. We use eponymous names all of the time: Steller's Jay, Lewis's Woodpecker, Clark's Nutcracker. Some of these names are familiar if you know the history of the exploration of the United States: Georg Wilhelm Steller, the German naturalist who accompanied Vitus Bering on his exploration of the seas and lands around Alaska; Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, who were the co-leaders of the first American expedition to map a route from the Great Plains to the Pacific coast. Steller described the jay in his 1741 expedition journal, but the bird was not named for him until forty years later in the writings of John Latham and J.F. Gmelin (*Audubon to Xantus: The Lives of Those*



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Commemorated in North American Bird Names by Barbara and Richard Mearns, pg. 414). Lewis's Woodpecker was collected by the explorers in 1805.

Eponymous words also creep into birds' Latin names such as *Empidonax traillii* (Willow Flycatcher) and *Geothlypis tolmiei* (MacGillivray's Warbler). The name of Thomas Stewart Traill, a British friend of John James Audubon, still remains in the Linnean name for the Willow Flycatcher. However, a more prominent designation disappeared when Traill's Flycatcher was split into the Willow and Alder Flycatchers in the 1970s. MacGillivray's Warbler has different eponymous names in English and Latin and a slightly more complicated etymology. Audubon supplied a description and named the bird after his Scottish birder colleague William MacGillivray. However, a previous scientific write-up of the warbler by John Townsend (another name familiar to us) honored his friend Dr. William F. Tolmie, so we end up with two different honorifics attached to this bird.

Do names that honor discoverers or friends of the discoverers have a place in modern nomenclature? This difficult question came into the news this summer when, in the continuing discussions around race, the AOS chose to rename McCown's Longspur to the Thick-billed Longspur. Why was this done, and is it the right thing to do? John Porter McCown was a U.S. Army officer who served in the Mexican-American War of 1846-1847 and was later stationed in Texas, where he collected skins and submitted descriptions for several birds not previously named, including his Longspur. In 1861, McCown and many of his fellow Southern officers left the U.S. Army to join the Army of the Confederate States of America, a rebellion whose sole intent (not withstanding people who talk

about the mythology of the "Lost Cause") was to support the existence and extension of slavery.

The decision to change the English name of *Rhynchophanes mccownii* generated a lot of discussion in national and local birding communities (and, as far as I know, the Latin name has not been changed). People wondered who McCown was. (I am interested in the history of the American Civil War, and I was not familiar with the name.) I saw email posts asking why we should care about the name and asking questions similar to those posed in discussions about removal of Confederate monuments from public spaces. I don't have strong opinions on the general use of eponymous names. As we have seen above, descriptive or habitat-based names give useful clues when identifying and classifying birds. And, honorific names help me to think about the history of exploration and development of natural history in our country and continent and associate specific species with that process. In cases where the name is not familiar (who is Townsend or who is Nuttall?), I want to dig into the background. However, I also believe that names carry historical and cultural weight that can impede the ability of people from other races to enter into what is a mainly white, middle-class hobby and field of study.

Did the AOS make the right decision to change the name of McCown's Longspur? As a birder and a historian, the answer for me is "absolutely." John McCown fought for a cause whose sole purpose was defending slavery. Should all eponymous names be changed to descriptive names? I'm not sure, but I believe that we need to be open to the opportunities for education and discussion about even small things like bird names in fostering equity and inclusion during these difficult and tumultuous times. ●



Bird Notes

Please report rarities to
pdunten@gmail.com

Pete Dunten

Santa Clara County eBird Reviewer

Geese to Sandpipers

A ribbon of 100 **Snow Geese** passed over Los Gatos on 12 Oct (JPa), a harbinger of winter. A flock of 16 **Ross's Geese** over J Grant CP on 21 Oct was a nice count (WP, KON), with a single **Snow Goose** tagging along. Such high counts of Ross's Geese don't usually occur until December. Three **Tundra Swans** flew over Ulistac NA on 27 Oct, again an early date (BB). A single **Brandt's Cormorant** was photographed near Charleston Slough on 26 Aug (RjB), the first in the county since 2014. Then one to two Brandt's Cormorants joined the Double-crested Cormorants at Sunnyvale pond A4 beginning on 3 Sept (GL). They were seen regularly through 26 Sept (m. ob.) and one was found again on 25 Oct (DW). A **Ferruginous Hawk** photographed over Los Gatos on 22 Sept was our earliest arrival, by one day (JPa). **Black Rails** were hard to find this year, with only the fourth report of the year on 31 Jul at the Sunnyvale WPCP, where one was heard calling (JM). One to two **Pacific Golden-Plovers** were in New Chicago Marsh between 13 Oct (FV) and 22 Oct (m. ob.). They seem to prefer the company of Killdeer on their fall visits, while at other times and locations they often associate with Black-bellied Plovers. Two shorebirds normally found on rocks along the coast stopped briefly in the county. A **Black Turnstone** turned up on the edge of pond A8 between 31 Aug (fide eBird) and 2 Sept (m. ob.) and a **Wandering Tattler** visited Shoreline Lake between 27 Sept (JM) and 2 Oct (m. ob.). This fall saw extraordinary numbers of **Pectoral Sandpipers** on migration. The first arrival was a single sandpiper on 5 Sept at Palo Alto Baylands (Mlg). Numbers were up to 14 sandpipers in New Chicago Marsh on 13 Sept (STu), then 60 on 4 Oct (STu) and 67 on 6 Oct (MJM). Counts tapered to 35 on 13 Oct (ABu) and 12 on 18 Oct (ABr), with the last sighting of two birds occurring on 22 Oct (DA). The last year in which fall migration brought more than 50 Pectoral Sandpipers was 2004. A **Ruff** has frequented New Chicago Marsh beginning on 12 Aug (MA). It has been seen sporadically throughout August, September, and October (m. ob.). A single **Red Phalarope**, another coastal visitor, found its way to the south end of the bay, where it was seen on 21 Sept along the edge of pond A1 (RPh).

Gulls to Woodpeckers

An immature **Sabine's Gull** was sighted heading west over pond A4 on 5 Sept (ABu, GL, SW). It settled in at the Sunnyvale



Ruff
Garrett Lau



Sabine's Gull
Garret Lau



Green-tailed Towhee
Meg Barron

WPCP west pond and the surrounding channels until 9 Sept (m. ob.). A **Long-tailed Jaeger**, the county's 4th, flew over Shoreline Lake on 4 Aug (ED). A **Parasitic Jaeger** was another one-day visitor, flying over pond A8 on 2 Sept (STu). After a period of five years with no reports, a **Common Murre** found its way into the county on 25 Aug (BM). The Murre was seen in Guadalupe Slough, bordering the Sunnyvale WPCP. Another Murre was found in the Guadalupe River above Alviso Marina on 2 Sept (DW). Neither Murre was seen on more than one day. The few Murres that visit the county typically don't fare well. A **White-winged Dove** keeping its own company was photographed at the Sunnyvale WPCP on 2 Sept (PDU). It was seen with other doves on 3 Sept (BM, MDo). Of the nine county records, 7 have been in late summer and fall. An immature male **Costa's Hummingbird** visited a feeder in Morgan Hill between 19 Aug and 19 Sept (fide eBird). An immature **Red-naped Sapsucker** was found at Ulistac NA on 7 Oct (MKn), together with two Red-breasted Sapsuckers. Those three sapsuckers will have a rough time maintaining exclusive use of any sap wells they open. This is one of our earlier arrivals for a Red-naped Sapsucker; we don't usually have an opportunity to see the immature plumage. The sapsucker was spotted again on 25 Oct (ChJ).

Flycatchers to Tanagers

The long-staying **Vermilion Flycatcher** at J Grant CP was present through at least 17 Aug (FV). It has been in the park since 13 Apr. Traveling from even further southeast, a **Thick-billed Kingbird** put in an appearance on Mt Umunhum on 7 Oct (WGB). The Kingbird was the county's first. A **Red-eyed Vireo** found at J Grant CP on 31 Jul (RMz, ED) stayed through 10 Aug; it was the county's 6th record. The epicenter of fall warbler activity was Vasona Lake CP this year. A **Northern Waterthrush** on 29 and 30 Aug (MDo) was the first vagrant at the park. Another was there on 23 and 29 Sept (STu, MDo, MDa). A **Blackpoll** visited the park between 26 Sept (STu) and 30 Sept. The second Blackpoll of the season was at the Palo Alto WCP on 26 Oct (MJM). The county's first **Bay-breasted Warbler** (found by SLC, identified by BM) was at Vasona between 26 Sept and 4 Oct. The last of the vagrant warblers detected at Vasona was an **American Redstart** noted on 27 Sept (MDa). A yard with a water fountain in the Duveneck-St. Francis neighborhood of Palo Alto provided a bath for a **Tennessee Warbler** on 19 Sept (fide eBird). Completing the list of vagrant warblers, a **Chestnut-sided Warbler** stopped near the Rengstorff House at Shoreline Park between 3 and 5 Oct (AL, JY). A **Green-tailed Towhee** was a surprise visitor to a Los Altos yard on 13 Sept (MBa). Although this was not the first in Los Altos, not many yard lists include a Green-tailed Towhee. That particular yard also hosted a **Clay-colored Sparrow** on 13 Sept (MBa), a first for the town. A second Green-tailed Towhee was found along Stevens Creek above Crittenden Lane on 25 Sept (MMR). Two more Clay-colored Sparrows were found this fall, one at Ulistac NA on 30 Aug



Palo Alto Baylands
Eve Meier

SELF-GUIDED FIELD TRIPS

New! SCVAS trip leaders have been developing a series of self-guided field trips. We will pick out a few special places to bird each month based on where you can socially distance and enjoy the best of the birding season.

Visit <https://scvas.org/self-guided-field-trips> to see this month's selection. Regular field trips have been suspended but will resume as soon as it is safe to do so.

(BM) and one at Vasona Lake CP on 27 Sept (STu). Three **Brewer's Sparrows** this fall was a nice total. The first was at Alviso Marina CP on 27 and 28 Aug (EvM), the second along the Guadalupe River Trail near Blossom River Way on 3 Sept (JPa), and the third along the edge of pond A4 on 14 Sept (GL). The five **Vesper Sparrows** seen this fall were a record high total for fall migration. The first was at the Don Edwards EEC garden on 19 Sept (MA), followed by two at Shoreline Park from 1 – 6 Oct (DA), a fourth at Vasona Lake CP from 5 – 8 Oct (GL), and the fifth at Martial Cottle Park on 11 Oct (STu). A **Summer Tanager** stayed for only a day at Ulistac NA on 17 Sept (PDU).

Observers Mike Ambrose (MA), Dorian Anderson (DA), Meg Barron (MBa), Raja Bhadury (RjB), Bob Bolles (BB), Bill Bousman (WGB), Andrew Bradshaw (ABr), Adam Burnett (ABu), Hallie Daly (HDy), Emilie Danna (ED), Mike Danzenbaker (MDa), Matthew Dodder (MDo), Pete Dunten (PDU), Monica Iglesia (MIg), Chris Johnson (ChJ), Mark Kinsman (MKn), Garrett Lau (GL), Amy Lauterbach (AL), Susan LeClair (SLC), Mike Mammoser (MJM), Roberto Martinez (RMz), Eve Meier (EvM), Brooke Miller (BM), Julio Mulero (JM), Kitty O'Neil (KON), Janna Pauser (JPa), William Pelletier (WP), Ryan Phillips (RPh), Mike Rogers (MMR), Steve Tucker (STu), Frank Vanslager (FV), Dave Weber (DW), Susan Weinstein (SW), James Yurchenco (JY)



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