



The Avocet

The Newsletter of the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society

December 1997

National Audubon Certifies SCVAS---"Outstanding!"

Editor's note—Every year we dutifully prepare our Chapter Certification Report, required by National Audubon for renewal of our official status as a chapter of the parent organization. We are fortunate to have staff to prepare this document, and Chapter Manager Garth Harwood is diligent and thorough in his preparation of the report, which few of us ever read. It was gratifying to receive the following letter from Audubon-California acknowledging and praising our efforts, and we thought it would be appropriate to share Jill Shirley's comments with our readers:

"Dear Garth:

The Audubon-California Office has received and reviewed your chapter's annual certification report. The Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society's charter has been renewed for the coming year and is

certified as a chapter of the National Audubon Society until June, 1998.

What an outstanding report! The Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society should feel very proud of its many accomplishments this past year.

The chapter is really doing a tremendous job. The variety and depth of conservation activities that the chapter is engaged in is very impressive. From land-use planning, to preserving open space, to the dozens of projects merely summarized in your report, SCVAS has proven itself a real environmental leader. Craig Breon continues to do an excellent job in his role as chapter advocate.

Your environmental education programs are also excellent. What an impressive array of projects! Several could serve as a model for other chapters around the state. We also would like to acknowledge your excellent monthly

programs, an impressive field trip schedule, and a fine newsletter.

We would also like to thank the chapter for its continuing support for the programs of Audubon-California. The success of our work in California depends upon the political, moral and financial support we receive from chapters like Santa Clara Valley Audubon.

For our part, we would like to renew our commitment to you to assist and support your chapter's many fine programs. Through our Chapter Outreach Program we intend to bring more leadership training, strategic planning and chapter building workshops to individual chapters and regional councils. The Egret Camp held at Richardson Bay was part of this effort. I was glad to see SCVAS so well represented. Let me know if you are interested in a workshop tailored for your chapter.

We wish to thank you, your board members, and chapter members for the ongoing accomplishments you have made to further the Audubon Mission. If I can be of any assistance to you in the coming year, please contact me in the Audubon-California office.

Sincerely,

Jill Shirley, Director
Chapter Outreach program"

"Only a bill . . ."

Craig Breon's tale of a successful legislation effort . . . Page 6

San Jose Christmas Bird Count

This is a reminder of the annual San Jose Christmas Bird Count (CBC) on Sunday, December 21. What will El Nino bring us this year—lousy weather, good birds, or both?! Please plan to join us for a full day of birding adventure (rain or shine) as we canvas our count circle from the hills to the bay, from riparian corridors to urban parks, recording all our many resident and wintering birds, and perhaps finding a few rarities to add some spice.

All levels of birding experience are needed. Newcomers and beginners are especially welcome to help us spot, count, and list the birds. Count circle sections and leaders are listed on Page 3. Just dress warmly, bring your binoculars and lunch. A fee of \$5 per participant covers CBC compilation and publication costs. After the long day of birding and counting, plan to join us at the Leininger Center in Kelley Park, San Jose, for dinner and countdown beginning at 5:30. If you can help with dinner preparations, please contact Kathy Parker at (408)358-2832. (We especially need desserts!)

For more local CBC information, see Garth's Office View column on Pages 2 - 3 and the Calendar listings on Page 3.

VIEW FROM THE OFFICE

by Garth Harwood, SCVAS Chapter Manager

IT'S CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT SEASON again and I'm getting excited already. Christmas Bird Counts appeal to me on numerous levels that everyday birding experiences barely touch. The kid in me loves the scavenger-hunt aspect, the simple pleasure of finding the "goodies" hidden here, there, and everywhere, even in the most familiar of landscapes. The biologist in me loves the sense of contributing to a grand tradition of citizen science, collecting data that will take its place in (arguably) the biggest and longest-lasting database on birds in existence. My would-be athlete side goes for the endurance aspect—the early start, greater-than-usual distances to be covered, and the intensity of focus. I'm part just-for-fun birder, too, and as such, I appreciate any excuse to go out and see lots of pretty birds with good company. And last but not least, there's bound to be someone more expert than me in my group, from whom I can learn those nuances of behavior, seasonal plumages, and other minutiae that permit a person to step up to the next level of birding.

WHAT HAPPENS ON A Christmas Bird Count? Rain or shine, Count Day starts at first light, when birds are generally most active and vocal, and distractions are fewest. Typically, each Count circle is subdivided into manageable sections with a volunteer coordinator organizing teams within each section. Each team consists of at least one very experienced birder, but may also contain members with little experience. Generally, the less experienced members are of great help to the proceedings, provided they're true team players and are willing to serve as "clipboard jockeys" a lot of the time. Even the most skilled and experienced birder struggles with the simple logistics of both viewing and keeping good records simultaneously, and a patient scribe earns the appreciation of other team members as well as a treasure trove of new bird lore.

ONCE THE TEAMS are in the field, each takes its own approach. Typically all but one team member are gazing around at any given moment, alternately spotting and then, more carefully, identifying birds; the last team member strives to keep jotting everything down accurately on the standard tally form. Some teams spend just a couple of hours out; other die-hards start out owling hours before daylight and can't be coaxed in until long after sundown. Most teams follow an established route of some sort, in order to increase the comparability of data between years, but adjustments are common, as when two members of my team forgot their binoculars one year! (Remember, this thing starts early.) It seemed prudent, on that occasion, to include their home in the early part of our itinerary. Count day ends for most participants with a get-together over dinner for the formal "countdown" where each team reports on its day. [I like to go on two or more Counts each winter, it's so much fun. The "window" of approximately 2 1/2 weeks during which CBCs may be held permits some to take place a few days before Christmas, and others several days after. Personally, I find that a week or so between Counts suits me best, but there are plenty of counters who can't seem to get enough, and who go on every Count in the area, even if they're back-to-back in foul weather (this last category includes a large portion of the SCVAS Board of Directors!)]

YOU ARE NEEDED ON THIS YEAR'S COUNTS! Both of the larger Counts by SCVAS (Palo Alto and San Jose) have experienced declines in participation over the past several years, and we'd like to get the numbers back up, especially in the Palo Alto circle, where some large and bird-rich areas have gone under-

cont'd on Page 3

SCVAS OFFICERS and BOARD

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Leda Beth Gray	'96-99	650/424-8573
Sandy Cortright	97-00	408/738-1251
Ann Verdi	97-00	408/266-5108
David Drake	'97-00	650/424-8575

STAFF

Chapter Manager	Garth Harwood	408/252-3747
Environmental Advocate	Craig Breon	408/252-3748
Office Fax		408/252-2850
Website		www.scvas.org

CHAIRPERSONS

Avocet	Grant Hoyt	650/969-7892
Education	Bobbie Handen	408/356-4263
Envir. Action (Vacant)		
Field Trips		
Weekend	Dave Cook	408/729-7310
Weekday	Shirley Gordon	408/996-9863
	Rosalie Lefkowitz	650/494-6358/
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Audubon Council		
Delegate	Leda Beth Gray	650/424-8573

General meetings are open to the public. Board of Directors meetings are open to all members. Call the office at (408) 252-3747 for times and directions.

The Avocet is published monthly (except for July and August) by the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society, 22221 McClellan Rd., Cupertino, CA 95014. Deadline is the 25th of two months prior. Send contributions to The Avocet, c/o SCVAS at the above address.

SCVAS is the chapter of the National Audubon Society for Santa Clara County.

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Rare Bird Alert: 415-681-7422

December 1997 Calendar

On all field trips carpool and share expenses. Bring binoculars, field guides, warm clothing, lunch (optional on half-day trips) and liquids.

**Denotes Field Trip

****Wednesday Dec. 3, 8:30 AM.** Half day. Grant Ranch Co. Park. Leader: Alan Thomas (408)265-9236. From I-680 take Alum Rock Ave. northeast, turn right on Mt. Hamilton Rd. then go approx. 9 miles to park. Meet at Halls Valley Lake parking lot on left, just past park entrance. Fresh water ducks, oak woodland birds, possible Golden Eagle. Moderate 2-mile walk. Lunch optional; rain cancels.

Wednesday Dec. 3, 7:30 PM. Bay Area Bird Photographers will feature a Doug Cheeseman slide show and discussion of seabirds and marine mammals of Antarctica and California. Lucy Evans Interpretive Center, E. Embarcadero Rd., Palo Alto.

Thursday Dec. 4 - Sunday Dec. 7. Central Valley Birding Symposium, Stockton. The new Central Valley Bird Club and San Joaquin Audubon are sponsoring this event featuring top birders, artists and photographers. Daily field trips to observe swans, geese, ducks, cranes, raptors, etc., plus workshops, speakers, book signings, and great meals. \$75 registration fee; limited to 300 participants. Call (800) 350-1987 for information.

****Saturday Dec. 6, 8:30 AM.** Half day. Charleston Slough. Leader TBA (call Dave Cook (408)249-9305 for info). From Hwy 101 in Mt. View take San Antonio Rd. north to Terminal

Way, meet in parking area. Shorebirds, ducks, gulls, herons, egrets. Great for beginning birders.

Tuesday Dec. 9, 9:30 AM. The Eve Case Bird Discussion Group will meet at the home of Pat and Jean Dubois, 17150 Buena Vista Ave., Saratoga (408)395-4264. Topic: California Towhee.

****Sunday Dec. 14, 8:00 AM.** Half day. Ogier Ponds. Leader: Bob Reiling (408)253-7527. From Hwy 101 in Morgan Hill take Cochrane Rd west to Monterey Hwy, turn right, go north 2.6 miles, turn right towards Model Airplane Skypark. Follow rd. for 1/2 mile, park in gravel lot at L.

CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNTS:

Saturday Dec. 20---Crystal Springs. Contact Robin Smith (650)325-3306.

Sunday Dec. 21---San Jose. See Pg. 1.

Monday Dec. 22---Palo Alto. Contact Merry Haveman (650)344-2146.

Tuesday Dec. 30---Mt. Hamilton. Contact Don Schmoldt (510)215-1910.

Tuesday Dec. 30---San Francisco. Contact Golden Gate Audubon (415)843-2222.

Saturday Jan. 3---Ano Nuevo. Contact Robin Smith (650)325-3306.

Saturday Jan. 3, 8 AM - 3 PM. Pelagic birding in Monterey Bay. Leaders: Doug and Gail Cheeseman (408)741-5330 or (800)527-5330. \$50 per person to see seabirds and marine

mammals. Depart from Monterey Fisherman's Wharf at 8:00 AM sharp. [There is also space available on the Cheesemans' Extended Antarctica Expedition next year (Dec. 27 1998 - Jan. 24 1999).]

****Saturday Jan. 3, 8:00 AM.** Post-CBC Rarities Chase. Leader: John Mariani (408) 997-2066. Bring a full tank of gas (carpooling strongly encouraged), all-weather gear, and your traveling field guide library as the group attempts to track down some of the oddball birds seen on local Christmas Counts. Meet at ranger's kiosk on Jetty Rd., just north of Moss Landing harbor on Hwy 1.

****Saturday Jan. 10, 8:30 AM - 2 PM.** Golden Gate Park, S.F. Leader: Alan Hopkins (415)664-0983. Take I-280 north to 19th Ave into Golden Gate Park. Turn right onto M.L. King Jr. Ave (first right upon entering park), continue east to Strybing Arboretum. Park on M.L.K. Ave/Middle Dr.

Tuesday Jan. 13, 9:30 AM. The Eve Case Bird Discussion Group will meet at the home of Pat and Jean Dubois, 17150 Buena Vista Ave, Saratoga (408)395-4264. Topic: American Robin.

San Jose CBC Sections

A Alviso

Richard Carlson (650) 494-3160

B Fremont Hills

Craig Breon (408) 252-3748

C Calaveras

Keppler Stone (408) 263-3395

D Alum Rock

Dave Cook (408) 949-8247(pager)

E Evergreen

Mary Simpson (408)370-2177

F South (Central San Jose)

Clysta Seney (408) 261-9431

G South Central (Santa Clara)

Mark Miller (650) 967-3429

H Agnew

Grant Hoyt (650) 969-7892

I Milpitas

Ann Verdi (408) 749-2199 (w)

J Berryessa Hills

Harriet Gerson (408) 252-6244



OFFICE VIEW *cont'd*

counted for far too long (notably in several parts of the Skyline Ridge area such as Windy Hill, La Honda OSP, and Black Mountain). To participate in the San Jose Count, please contact coordinator Ann Verdi at (408)749-2199. For the Palo Alto Count, call the SCVAS office at (408)252-3747 or volunteer coordinator Merry Haveman at (650)344-2146. Dates for those two Counts are Dec. 21 and 22, respectively. The Mt. Hamilton Count takes place Dec. 30; call Don Schmoldt at (510)215-1910. See you at the Countdown(s)!

Field Notes

by Bill Bousman

Grebes through Waterfowl

A **Red-necked Grebe** was found at Shoreline Lake on 22 Oct (RCC) and seen through at least 30 Oct (m.ob.). Wintering **American Bitterns** were first found on 10 Oct when one was seen on Artesian Slough (AME). Single birds were found on the outer Alviso ponds 27-30 Oct (MiF, MMR) and at Lake Cunningham on 31 Oct (MMR, SCR). **Cattle Egrets** have been occasional this month in the vicinity of the Arzino Ranch in Alviso with six on 7 Oct (SCR), four on 10 Oct (MMR, SBT, MiF), and five on 12 Oct (MMR, SCR, SBT). Early **Greater White-fronted Geese**, all immatures, include a bird at the San Jose-Santa Clara Water Pollution Control Plant (WPCP) drying ponds with an injured wing on 12 Oct (MMR, SCR, SBT), one at the Palo Alto Duck Pond 12-15 Oct (MMR, SCR, SBT, AME), and one near the Alviso Marina on 21 Oct (SMi). **Eurasian Wigeon** have appeared this fall in fairly good numbers with one at the Sunnyvale WPCP ponds on 12 Oct (MMR, SCR, SBT) and 25 Oct (MJM) and up to three birds in the Charleston Slough-Adobe Creek area from 12 Oct through the end of the month (MMR, SCR, SBT, v.ob.). **Blue-winged Teal** have returned to their usual haunts as well with three to nine birds seen in the Adobe Creek area of the Palo Alto Flood Control Basin (FCB) 12-26 Oct (MMR, SCR, SBT, MJM, JM et al.). Twelve **Redhead** on the North Pond of the Palo Alto FCB on 20 Oct (MJM) suggests that these birds will once again winter here. Two birds were also seen on the Sunnyvale WPCP ponds on 26 Oct (MJM). **Barrow's Goldeneye** is now a regular wintering species on Shoreline Lake, but the two noted on 24 Oct (RWR) are the earliest of record. A pair of **Hooded Mergansers** were seen on the Coleman Road ponds on 25 Oct (AV). This species is now regular on our county percolation ponds and small reservoirs.

Raptors through Skimmers

An **Osprey** over Coyote Creek below Hwy 237 on 13 Oct (RWR) and one over the Alviso Marina on 20 Oct (SBT, SCR) were both in typical locations. Lingering **Lesser Yellowlegs** were found in Alviso near Spreckles during the month with a high count of 13 on 11 Oct (MJM) and three birds still there on 26 Oct (MMR). **Ruddy Turnstones** are always rare this far down the bay, so one on Salt Pond A9 in Alviso on 30 Oct (MMR) was a good find. Much less expected was that bird of the rocky ocean shores, the **Black Turnstone**. Five were found on Salt Pond A9 on 27 Oct (MiF) and one was seen on 30 Oct (MMR) nearby in Coyote Slough. North of the county line along the bay

*A remarkable October
for migrants, with
Chimney Swift,
Tropical Kingbird, and
Baltimore Oriole*

shore **Red Knots** are typically found in the fall, but two on the mudflats off the Palo Alto Baylands on 12 Oct (SCR, MMR, SBT) had overstepped their normal bounds. Also out of bounds were the four **Sanderlings** found on Salt Pond A9 on 26 Oct (MMR). This autumn was a particularly good one for **Semipalmated Sandpipers** and two juveniles at the Coyote Creek Riparian Station (CCRS) waterbird pond on 4 Oct (SCR, v.ob.) were very late. Also late was the single **Baird's Sandpiper** found at the waterbird pond on 5 Oct (CIW, ChW). The count of **Pectoral Sandpipers** peaked at 37 on the CCRS waterbird pond on 4 Oct (MMR) and dropped after that with four birds recorded there on 19 Oct (MJM). Two to three birds on Salt Pond A9 on 29 Oct (MMR) were the last of the month's birds. As in each of the last three falls a juvenile **Sharp-tailed Sandpiper** was found in

the crowd of Pectorals. This autumn's bird was first found on the CCRS waterbird pond on 3 Oct (NL) and was found more or less regularly until it was last seen on 18 Oct (DBL). This is the ninth county record for this Asian shorebird. Although not found regularly during the month, the Alviso **Stilt Sandpipers** from earlier in the fall apparently lingered, as two in basic plumage were seen at Spreckles and State on 18 Oct (MJM) and one was there on 22 Oct (NL). A juvenile female **Ruff** found last month at the CCRS waterbird pond was seen there at least through 19 Oct (MJM, v.ob.). A second bird was recorded there on 4 Oct (TGr, MMR, MiF) and may have been there for a longer period. Rare in any season, a **Red Phalarope** was seen at the Emily Renzel Wetlands on 20 Oct (RCO, RLe), but not after that. A 2nd-winter **Heermann's Gull** was at the Alviso Marina on 17 Oct (SCR) and probably the same bird was over Salt Pond A13 on 20 Oct (NL). An adult **Lesser Black-backed Gull** has returned to the vicinity of the Alviso Marina for its third winter. First found on 11 Oct (MJM) it has been seen there regularly since (m.ob.). A probable 1st-winter bird, found at Lake Cunningham

on 31 Oct (SCR, MMR), is exceptional. Alviso's plethora of rare larids was augmented with an immature **Sabine's Gull** east of the marina on 7 Oct (SCR) that was seen by many observers over the next ten days. This gull, our eighth county record, was last recorded on 17 Oct (SCR). Our first **Elegant Tern** of the season was one seen on Salt Pond A13 in Alviso at a feeding frenzy on 8 Oct (NL, RWR). Five birds including an immature were nearby on 17 Oct (SCR) and two were seen the next day on Salt Pond A12 (MJM). Sightings of an immature **Common Tern** at the Alviso Marina on 17 Oct (SCR), Salt Pond A12 on 22 Oct (NL), and Salt Pond A9 on 26 Oct (MMR) probably represent one bird. The last observation is the latest record we have for this rare migrant. Another late record was a single **Black Tern** that joined the Alviso feeding frenzy on 8 Oct noted

Field Notes *continued*

above (NL, RWR). The **Black Skimmer** numbers on Charleston Slough built to record highs with 14 birds counted on 9 Oct (MMR), 14 Oct (MJM), and 26 Oct (JM et al.).

Owls through Grosbeaks

At least two **Short-eared Owls** along Coyote Slough next to Salt Pond A9 in Alviso on 27 Oct (MiF) were the start of a hoped for winter influx. A surprise in the late migration of swifts was a single **Chimney Swift** over the Coleman Road ponds on 1 Oct (AV *fide* MMR). This is only the third county record for this eastern swift. **Vaux's Swifts** were later and in greater numbers than most falls with a peak count of 50 over the Coleman Road ponds on 2 Oct and 30 still there on 7 Oct (both MMR). A male **Pileated Woodpecker** was seen on 18 Oct (SAG) in the Montebello OSP. A **Hammond's Flycatcher** was banded on 7 Oct (NL) and is the latest fall record we have for this rare migrant empid. Also late, and exceptional for October, was an **Ash-throated Flycatcher** along Coyote Creek below Hwy 237 on 4 Oct (MJM et al.). Flycatcher honors, however, go to coastal California's October surprise, the **Tropical Kingbird**. One bird was found along Matadero Creek below Hwy 101 on 5 Oct (DSt) and a second bird, most likely, at the Alviso Marina on 9 Oct (M&JM, CL). The latter bird was re-found the next morning at Spreckles and Grand in Alviso (NL) and was seen by many before the day was out. These are the third and fourth county records for this species.

A search for late fall vagrants along the Guadalupe River above Montague yielded the second county record of **Magnolia Warbler** on 25 Oct (MJM, SCR). A female or immature male, the bird was re-found the next day (MiF, AME, MMR, RCo et al.). A more expected vagrant was the **Palm Warbler** found on the ITT fields in Palo Alto on 8 Oct (RCo). A **MacGillivray's Warbler**, scarce but regular in the fall, was found along Coyote Creek below Hwy 237 on 4 Oct (MJM et al.) and possibly the same bird again on 11 Oct (NL). Rounding out the warbler migration was an exceptionally late **Yel-**

low-breasted Chat banded at CCRS on 17 Oct (*fide* AJ). A **Western Tanager** along Guadalupe River on 12 Oct (SCR, MMR, SBT) and 25 Oct (SCR, MJM) is late for a migrant and may be a wintering bird. A surprising find at an Almaden feeder was a **Green-tailed Towhee** on 5 Oct (BH) that remained at least through 7 Oct (MiF, MMR). A **Rufous-crowned Sparrow** was seen along Coyote Creek below Hwy 237 on 8 Oct (NL). This is not far from local breeding populations but unusual for such a sedentary bird. A **Brewer's Sparrow**, a rare fall migrant, was found near the old Harbormaster's House in the Palo Alto Baylands on 12 Oct (MJM). A **Vesper Sparrow** was seen near the CCRS waterbird pond on 5 Oct (NL) and an immature, perhaps a second bird, was banded further up the creek the same day (AJ). A late migrant **Grasshopper Sparrow** was found along Coyote Creek below Hwy 237 on 5 Oct as well (AJ). A **White-throated Sparrow** on the Guadalupe River above Montague on 12 Oct (SCR, MMR, SBT) was the first of the season. An adult male **Baltimore Oriole**, the third record for the county, was found near Harold and Sutter in Santa Clara prior to 17 Oct (LM *fide* GH). It was seen on and off through 22 Oct (MJM, SCR, MiF, KPa). Fifteen **Lawrence's Goldfinches** were found at the Palo Alto Hills Golf and Country Club on 29 Oct (AME), the only report this month.

Observers: Richard Carlson (RCC), Rita Colwell (RCo), Al Eisner (AME), Mike Feighner (MiF), Steve Glover (SAG), Tom Grey (TGr), Barbara Harkleroad (BH), Garth Harwood (GH), Alvaro Jaramillo (AJ), Rosalie Lefkowitz (RLe), Nick Lethaby (NL), David Lewis (DBL), Calvin Lou (CL), Mike Mammoser (MJM), Maria & John Meyer (M&JM), Linda Michaels (LM), Steve Miller (SMi), Joe Morlan (JM), Kathy Parker (KPa), Bob Reiling (RWR), Mike Rogers (MMR), Steve Rottenborn (SCR), Dick Stovel (DSt), Scott Terrill (SBT), Ann Verdi (AV), Chris Wolfe (ChW), and Claire Wolfe (ClW).

RARITIES: Please drop me a note: Bill Bousman, 321 Arlington Way, Menlo Park, CA 94025

New Faces on Audubon Board

The SCVAS Board of Directors has experienced several roster changes of late. The very dynamic and talented Chris Fischer has decided not to rejoin the Board after completion of her three-year term, in part because of a job change. Chris, whom many of us first met through her outstanding work at Coyote Creek Riparian Station in Alviso, has been hired by the CRMP of Half Moon Bay, diverting her energies to the coast, where she will undoubtedly continue her strong efforts as an organizer of creek monitoring and restoration programs. We thank her for her hard work as a Board member and volunteer these past three years. Her unflagging enthusiasm and vivacious, upbeat personality will be greatly missed. Good luck to Chris and her faithful sidekick, Joey (the bandana-wearing dog)!

With two other vacancies already existing, the Nominating Committee came up with three candidates, all of whom have accepted Board positions. Ann Verdi, Dave Cook and Charles Preuss have joined the Board effective this month, and we are pleased to welcome them. Ann has served as San Jose Christmas Bird Count compiler for the past three years, is an experienced field trip leader, and a keen birder. Dave is the Field Trip Committee chair, also a regular field trip leader, and the driving force behind our popular bluebird nestbox program. Charles is a former Coyote Creek Riparian Station field biologist with a strong interest in riparian habitat conservation, environmental education, and birding. We are grateful to these three for making time to take on the sometimes demanding, occasionally thankless, but generally rewarding duties of an Audubon Board member.

A special note of thanks, too, to Treasurer Doug McLendon, who rejoined the Board in October after a brief hiatus. Doug's background with non-profit organizations is extensive, and his contributions toward the planning, fiduciary, and fundraising aspects of the Chapter have been outstanding. We're most fortunate to have Doug holding down this key position.

Well I'm only a bill, yes I'm only a bill And I'm sitting here on Capitol Hill (Sacramento)

by Craig Breon

Thanks to the combined efforts of Assemblyman Jim Cunneen and Audubon California—with a small but important role played by SCVAS—children across the State will be able to learn from and enjoy a special environmental education program next year and for years to come. When Governor Wilson signed the Life Sciences and Conservation Education Program in October, a two-year effort met with success.

The bill authorizes an elementary school education program focusing on rare and endangered species and natural resources in the vicinity of schools around the State. A similar program was administered by National Audubon in years past, but that program sunsetted years ago. The new legislation creates a new program with many similar features.

The heart of the program allows an elementary school classroom to choose a local species or special place, such as a river or lake, to focus on. They then intensively study the species or place, often leading to conservation efforts and a greater understanding of the important natural resources in their community.

A conceptual draft of the bill was developed by Audubon staff in Sacramento and the Richardson Bay Audubon Sanctuary, who then needed to find a State legislator to carry the bill. At the time, Republicans controlled the State Assembly, so Audubon was eager to get Republican support.

This is where our chapter came in. Jim Cunneen is a local moderate, with an interest in environmental issues. Our Environmental Advocate, along with representatives of the Sierra Club and Greenbelt Alliance, met with Cunneen two years ago to discuss our legislative priorities and pitch a few bills we hoped he would carry. Of the bills mentioned, he chose our environmental ed bill to champion. We put him in contact with John McCaull, Audubon's legislative advocate in Sacramento, who helped shepherd the bill.

So far, so good, but things rarely go so easily at the Capitol. The original name of the bill was the Endangered Species Education Act [???], and just the words "endangered species" can be a political lightning rod. The bill stalled in its first year.

However, perseverance pays off. With a name change and a few changes to the program itself, efforts were renewed in this year's legislative session. The bill eventually passed the Assembly and the Senate and was signed by the Governor.

*California Audubon's
John McCaull helped
Assemblyman Cunneen
bring new environmental
education programs
to California schoolkids*

Audubon will hopefully play a special role in implementing this program. In the past, the education staff at Richardson Bay coordinated the project on contract to the State. The new bill allows this process to continue.

I recently caught up with Cunneen at a town meeting in the Willow Glen neighborhood of San Jose and asked him a few questions. I asked about the opposition to the bill, and whether he was worried about getting the Governor's signature. He told me that, rather than contacting the Governor himself, he asked Republican Keith Oldberg from the Central Valley to do it. Oldberg had been a critic of the bill and demanded changes as the bill came forward. Nonetheless, Oldberg wrote a letter urging the Governor to sign the bill. Talk about hope: perhaps we can slowly educate even those we would often consider diehard opponents.

I also asked about funding. While the program is approved, we must find a source of funding. Cunneen responded

that there are already dedicated sources for environmental education funding (such as the money generated by personalized license plates), and he would push for a portion of those funds to go to this program. If that doesn't work, he'll look for funding through the normal appropriations process.

Finally, I asked about his impressions of John McCaull and Audubon's effectiveness in the Capitol. He responded, "My admiration for John grows every day. He listens well to both sides, and knows what's practical to achieve." Since our chapter contributes a sizable amount to John's salary every year, that's good to hear.

All in all, this was a good example of working with a variety of players, over an extended time, to achieve admirable results. When a local chapter such as ours can bring Audubon priorities to a local legislator and get results, we generate an argument against the cynicism typically aimed at Sacramento and Washington.

We owe a hearty thank you to Jim Cunneen. Now, local educators should be out there with their students looking for interesting species or places. I nominate Burrowing Owls, Red-Legged Frogs, Coyote Creek, and Bair Island.

Footnote: In the course of my recent conversation with Jim Cunneen, he showed that he does indeed read the Avocet by noting that our September article on Burrowing Owls didn't mention that he wrote a letter to Doug Wheeler, California Secretary of Resources, in support of our efforts. His letter was clearly a big factor in getting the Department of Fish and Game to put resources into a regional owl habitat planning effort. Credit where credit is due.

By the way, Jim, did we mention that we could use help getting a small portion of the State land on the Agnews site in Santa Clara dedicated to owl habitat? Talk to you soon.

-----Craig

MROSD Clarifies Guidelines for Field Trips to Local Preserves

Dear Editor:

The Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District welcomes organized hiking groups to its network of open space preserves, and we're happy that the Audubon Society has had the opportunity to enjoy these lands for birdwatching, as noted in the September issue of the *Avocet*.

The article referencing the Audubon hike at Skyline Ridge OSP mentioned that the District ranger opened the entrance gate at 7:45 AM, even though the group met at 7:30. Although the preserves are open at sunrise, visitors are advised that the gates to the parking lots are normally opened by 8:00. This is because of the logistics involved in opening of all the Skyline area gates at the beginning of the daily ranger shift. When planning an outing, we ask that this be taken into account.

In the article, the author seems to object to the ranger asking if the group had a permit. Permits are required for groups of 20 or more and for pre-advertised activities. This is to ensure the protection of the natural resource, to avoid having numerous large groups use the same trail or preserve on the same date, and to allow for adequate parking. Also, in the event of an early arrival time, provisions can be made for prompt opening of the gate. Although a blanket permit has been issued for your organization, this does not cover additional services, such as the early opening of parking lots.

Finally, I'd like to remind your readers that District rangers are well-trained in protecting the resources and providing for a safe, enjoyable visit. The ranger who opened the gates in this instance was carrying out the job she had been instructed to do. If a visitor is ever unsatisfied with their visit or with the service from District staff, we would appreciate being contacted directly. We invite the public to contact us with any comments, questions, or requests for maps by calling (650) 691-1200.

Sincerely,

L. Craig Britton
General Manager

Editor's note: After receiving this letter, we telephoned Mr. Britton to discuss these issues. We apologized for any implication of dissatisfaction conveyed in the field trip report, and assured him that SCVAS will gladly comply with MROSD regulations regarding permits, pre-planning of field trips, gate opening times, etc. He was very understanding of birders' enthusiasm (and occasional impatience) in getting an early start on field trips, and reiterated his commitment to working with our organization and the public in general to make special arrangements for access whenever possible. We look forward to more outstanding birding trips to MROSD lands in the coming years, and are very grateful to Mr. Britton and his staff for the great care and dedication they demonstrate as stewards of our beautiful open spaces.

A common denizen of MROSD lands and other wooded regions of the South Bay, the Acorn Woodpecker is readily identifiable with its "clowny" face and wacky vocalization. Drawing by Rita Colwell



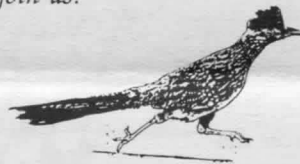
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