



# *The Avocet*

The Newsletter of the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society

January 1998

## Big Changes for Bay, Delta in 1998?

by Craig Breon

SCVAS Environmental Advocate

While Silicon Valley's economic sonic boom deafens all around it, there are quieter noises out there that will shortly affect us all. The following are a few of the events I expect our Audubon chapter to deal with this year.

### The End of Cargill?

In early November the press passed on an intriguing leak: San Francisco Airport wants to expand its runway system. They could go two directions—either leveling a good deal of Millbrae or moving further into the Bay. Guess which option they're pursuing.

As early as February or March, we could see the airport openly discussing

filling 300 acres of the Bay. The last time a fill of that magnitude occurred, half of our *Avocet* readers wore diapers or, like me, were yet unborn.

The first reaction of the environmental community will likely be pure opposition. Nearly 60% of the pre-western settlement Bay and its wetlands have already been filled.

To overcome this argument, the airport may offer an impressive amount of compensatory restoration. As the last fill of this magnitude pre-dates mitigation laws like CEQA or the Clean Water Act, there is no precedent. Rumor has it the airport expects to spend a minimum of \$100 million on mitigation, perhaps much more.

The only logical place for such mitigation money is wetlands restoration. In the South Bay, that means Cargill (the salt producer). Their salt ponds occupy nearly 30,000 acres of what were once thriving wetlands. The Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge boundaries technically encompass those lands, and completion of the Refuge through acquisition of the ponds has long been a goal of many conservation organizations. A white paper is being distributed among those groups calling for opposition to the fill unless all of Cargill's local properties are acquired as compensation.

If the Airport in fact offers to buy out Cargill, which is unlikely, regional environmental organizations would likely split, with some supporting the project. The decision is too far off to even guess what stance the SCVAS Board would take.

One way or another, a majority of Cargill's lands will eventually be purchased and restored. The economic productivity of those lands is currently too low (an estimated \$20 million per year) to justify long-term existence. As restored wetlands the lands are far more valuable to the people and wildlife of the region. If the

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### General Membership Meeting

Wednesday January 21

“One For My Baby, and One More For My Toad”

Dr. Robert Drewes

Palo Alto Cultural Center

Newell & Embarcadero Rds.

7:30 Hospitality 8:00 Program

Join us as Dr. Robert Drewes, Chair and Curator of the Department of Herpetology at the California Academy of Sciences, regales us with stories of frogs and toads around the world. Dr. Drewes has been studying frogs for over 20 years, particularly in East Africa. He is currently conducting a research program to inventory the reptiles and amphibians of the Impenetrable Forest of Uganda. Along with his ambitious career as a herpetologist, Bob is a popular ecology tour guide at the Cal Academy, and has been leading trips for more than two decades in countries such as Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda and India. Bob is an avid birder, and will be sure to include exotic bird photos from his expeditions in tonight's presentation. Don't miss this chance to hear a most distinguished and entertaining speaker!

### Attracting Chickadees

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# VIEW FROM THE OFFICE

by Garth Harwood, SCVAS Chapter Manager

THANK YOU, LOCAL BIRDERS! (Not to mention the Raags from Lincoln, MA!) It never ceases to amaze me that we don't have to do any sort of arm-twisting, no telephone solicitations, etc. . . all we do is write a simple, annual letter requesting your financial support, and you come through, time and time again. Our most recent "For the Birds" fall fundraiser is already (as I write this, in early December) showing signs of being a terrific success. Our February newsletter will go into more depth and mention some of the most generous donors by name, but for now, as I open another dozen or so envelopes each day, I'll simply say it in the most general terms: Thank you!

\* \* \* \* \*

VOLUNTEERS COME THROUGH IN HOLIDAY STYLE . . . putting in oodles of extra hours to get the Fall letter out on time, to staff the shop at our Open House December 6, and to ensure that you get prompt attention when you contact the office during the busiest time of our year. Special recognition is due for my own partner, **Kathy Alberts**, for decorating the premises and providing refreshments at the Open House, (mostly while toting 3-year-old **Hannah** on her hip) and for enduring many lonely evenings while I stuck around the office for mailing parties and the like.

But many others are due for recognition as well. **Donna Ducey**, **Elizabeth Ryono**, **Ardeth Greenquist**, and **Doug Greenquist** all put in substantial hours during the letter preparation and Open House. Artists and SCVAS members **Floy Zittin** (watercolors), **Dick Elliott** (woodcarvings), and **Larreau "Woody" Woodland** all attended the Open House with many examples of their works, which gave the event a welcoming feel. Floy's colorful, birding-oriented works will continue to grace our meeting room throughout the holiday season, and any sales will provide a substantial donation to SCVAS . . . come on in and have a look! She also has a show in progress at the SF Bay National Wildlife Refuge visitor center in Newark until January 13.

Helpers with the big mailing (4,000 hand-addressed envelopes - ouch!) were numerous, and included many members of the **SCVAS Board** as well as too many others to mention individually . . . quite a number of you were conscripted while innocently attending unrelated meetings. Thank you, all!

And I haven't even touched on the **Christmas Bird Counts**, which by now will have involved scores of you in all sorts of weathery adventures. Special thanks, however, to the several people who've stepped into new coordinating roles on the Counts, including the Greenquists, **Penelope Bowen**, and **Merry Haveman** on the Palo Alto Count.

\* \* \* \* \*

STILL ANOTHER BIG THANK-YOU is due for now-relocated-to-the-Central-Valley member **Linda Draper** for a HUGE donation of bird-feeding supplies, including many feeders, fountains, nestboxes, and seed storage bins—enough to fill the bed of her pickup. We'll happily use the new equipment to augment our array in the Native Plant Garden outside our office to display the widest assortment of feeder styles to our visitors, human and avian alike.

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## SCVAS OFFICERS and BOARD

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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.

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

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# January 1998 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**

**\*\*Saturday Jan. 3, 8:00 AM.** Post-CBC Rarities Chase. Leader: John Mariani (408) 997-2066. Kick off 1998 with some coastal vagrant-chasing. 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, and perhaps find a few of their own rarities. Meet at ranger's kiosk on Jetty Rd., just north of Moss Landing harbor on Hwy 1.

**Wednesday Jan. 7, 7:30 PM.** Bay Area Bird Photographers will host Brian E. Small and his grand photographic tour of the birds of Texas. Lucy Evans Baylands Interpretive Center, E. Embarcadero Rd., Palo Alto.

**\*\*Saturday Jan. 10, 8:30 AM - 2:00 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, Los Gatos (408)395-4264. Topic: American Robin.

**\*\*Wednesday Jan. 14, 8:30 AM.** Half day. Los Gatos Creek Park. Leader: John Arnold (650)948-4250. From Hwy 85 go north on Winchester; turn right on Hacienda, left on Dell, then right at park entrance to parking lot. Parking fee if no County Park sticker. Lunch optional; heavy rain cancels.

**\*\*Saturday Jan. 17, 1 PM.** Gull identification trip to Alviso Marina (postponed from November). Leader: Nick Lethaby (408)941-0223. From Hwy 237 take Gold St. exit north, turn left on Elizabeth St., right on Hope St. to Marina parking lot. 7 gull species likely; rarities possible.

**\*\*Sunday Jan. 18, 8 AM.** Half day. Charleston Slough. Leader: Bob Reiling (408)253-7527. From Hwy 101 in Mt. View take San Antonio Rd. exit north to Terminal Way, meet in parking area. Beginners welcome for excellent viewing of shorebirds, herons, egrets, ducks and gulls.

**\*\*Saturday Jan. 24, 9 AM.** Half day. Foster City. Leader: Rose Green (650)493-8378. From Hwy 101 take Hillsdale Blvd east, turn right on Shell. Meet at parking lot on right past Foster City Rec. Center. Variety of diving ducks; Hooded Merganser probable. Lunch optional; rain cancels.

**\*\*Wednesday Jan. 28, 9 AM.** Half day. Foster City. Leader: Rose Green (650)493-8378. Repeat of Jan. 24 trip; see directions above.

**\*\*Saturday Jan. 31, 9 AM.** Full day. Merced National Wildlife Refuge. Leader: Don Schmoldt (510)215-1910. Meet at NW corner of Rte 59/Sandy Mush Rd. From Hwy 101 in Gilroy take Hwy 152 east past Los Banos approx. 20 mi. then north 7 miles on Rte 59 to meeting place. Allow 2.5 hrs from San Jose, more if foggy. Raptors, ducks, geese, cranes, ibis.

**\*\*Saturday Feb. 7, 8:30 AM.** Half day. Grant Ranch Co. Park. Leader: Dave Cook (408)252-2850. From Hwy 101 in San Jose take Alum Rock Ave. east to Mt. Hamilton Rd., then approx. 9 mi. to park entrance. Parking OK on shoulder just past entrance. Waterbirds at lake; variety of raptors including possible Golden Eagle. Rain cancels.

**Tuesday Feb. 10, 9:30 AM.** The Eve Case Bird Discussion Group will meet at the home of Pat and Jean Dubois, 17150 Buena Vista Ave., Los Gatos (408)395-4264. Topic: Pine Siskin.

**\*\*Saturday Feb. 14, 9 AM.** Full day. Sutter Buttes raptor trip. Leader: Don Schmoldt (510)215-1910. From I-5 north of Sacramento take Hwy 20 east to Colusa, meet at city park on Main St./Hwy 20 intersection. Allow 3 hrs drive time from South Bay. Ferruginous and Rough-legged Hawks, Prairie Falcon, Golden Eagle, Mtn. Bluebird, Lewis' Woodpecker all possible.

**\*\*Wednesday Feb. 25, 8:30 AM.** Half day. Alviso. Leader: Dick Carlson (650)494-3160. Gulls, shorebirds, possible Burrowing Owl.



## OFFICE VIEW *cont'd*

Speaking of donated items, it's time to think ahead to the **Silent Auction** of surplus birding books, inaugurated last Spring. The event was so popular we plan to do it again, but we can only weed so many appealing titles out of our library! That's where you could come in . . . if your shelves have grown crowded with books you haven't looked at in years, it's a safe bet that another SCVAS member would be delighted to acquire them. We'd be happy to accept just one title or a hundred; by the April chapter meeting, we expect to have enough for another terrific sale.

\* \* \* \* \*

**SPECIAL NOTE TO BLUEBIRDERS:** you'll notice Ruth Troetschler's letter on Page 5 regarding the early dates of nest-site selection in smaller birds such as titmice, chickadees, and nuthatches . . . time to get those boxes up! As of this writing there are still boxes available at the office and several vacancies for trail monitors. Call now to get involved with the 1998 Bluebird Recovery Program nesting season!

# “Grandparenting” Chickadees and Titmice

by Leda Beth Gray

Now is a good time to put up nest boxes, especially if you hope to attract chickadees or titmice. The Oak Titmouse (formerly Plain Titmouse) and the Chestnut-backed Chickadee are two species in this area that begin investigating nest boxes in January, if not earlier. In addition, I have seen bluebirds investigating nest boxes as early as December at a local open space, so it appears that birds may investigate possible nest sites, in some cases well before their particular nesting season begins.

My husband and I have had a lot of fun over the past 4 years observing Chestnut-backed Chickadees nesting in our yard in Palo Alto. One reason we have enjoyed it so much is that the chickadees' nesting activities have been easily observable, allowing us to watch every phase of the process, all the way from collection of nesting material and building the nest to the parents bringing their fledglings back to our yard to show them our peanut and sunflower seed feeders. Our success has been great: two nestings for each of the first three years and one nesting this past year. For the two-nest years the time between the first batch of chicks fledging and a new pair moving in varied from more than a week to just one day! This was barely enough time for me to figure out that the chicks had fledged and be able to clean the nest box out for the next pair. I'm not sure why we haven't had titmice nest, as the nest boxes are appropriate for either species. My friend Sue, who lives in Menlo Park, has had both chickadees and titmice use the nest boxes in her yard.

In January 1994, we purchased three nest boxes and placed them in various locations in our standard sized suburban back and front yards. We had read that chickadees and titmice would not generally nest in close proximity to one another, but wanted to increase our odds of having selected an attractive location for either chickadees or titmice. The directions that came with the nest box told us to put non-aromatic wood shavings in the bottom of the box for the chickadees or titmice to remove, I guess so they can feel like they are excavating a cavity.

We were delighted with almost immediate interest from both chickadees and titmice popping in and out of the houses. We spent a lot of time sneaking around, hiding and peeking around corners to watch their activities. Sue had put her nest boxes up at about the same time, so we were excitedly exchanging information over the phone about what we observed. We saw evidence of sporadic removal of a few of the wood chips, but after a while we gave up trying to figure out who was going to do what in which box because this went on for weeks. Finally in late February, it was obvious when a pair became seriously interested in one of the nest boxes in my yard. They began systematically removing the wood shavings, carefully placing them on

*Peat moss, cat hair, and even chair stuffing provide suburban box-users with ample nest improvement material*

bushes and tree limbs distributed around our own and our neighbors' backyards. Three days earlier, titmice were doing the same thing in Sue's yard, and it turned out that she would share her observations of her titmice with me, and each time within a few days our chickadees were doing the same thing.

Within a day or two of removing the wood shavings, the chickadees were making beeline trips back and forth between the nest box and our neighbor's yard, carrying wads of something. I peeked through the fence and saw that the chickadees were stealing peat moss out of the bottoms of the neighbor's hanging baskets. Some of the wads weren't that small, sometimes comically large in comparison to the size of the chickadees making them look really strange when they flew past. Definitely enough to make anyone do a double-take.

Then they began working on the little bunches of cat hair that I had combed from my cats and attached to tree limbs around the yard with those twisty-tie things from the grocery store. By far they preferred Sta-Puft's long, pure white fur best, tugging off huge tufts and flying off to the nest box with giant white puffs of fur. Oak Titmice making a nest somewhere nearby came to the yard and also helped themselves to the fur. In addition, I discovered a titmouse on our back patio stealing stuffing out of an old chair that I had been thinking of reupholstering. Sta-Puft fur was equally popular in Sue's yard. Cat fur seemed to be the choice for the final nest layer.

After the nest-building activity came a period of low activity for a few weeks. Many times I sneaked up close to the nest box to listen for baby voices. It seemed like it was taking forever. I need not have worried; it was very obvious when the chicks had hatched. This occurred right on schedule within a few days of Sue's titmice. The parents were going in and out of the box with some kind of insects or spiders in their beaks. They took turns, often with one waiting on a nearby tree limb for the other to exit. I could hear the baby voices by moving close to the box as the chicks begged for food after one of the parents had gone in. They were faint at first but grew louder very quickly. It was interesting to me that, during this time of feeding chicks, the chickadees rarely if ever visited the peanut or sunflower seed feeders. They seemed to have switched to a total insect diet, which is what they were feeding the chicks. Sue has observed that the titmice in her yard did occasionally appear to take sunflower seeds to the chicks.

A few weeks later I knew the nestlings must be close to fledging because they were quite loud when a parent showed up with food, and I could see them jumping up and down inside the box, their little faces passing the entrance hole. Occasionally one would jump up to the entrance hole, and look out. Also, the parents began feeding them suet from our suet feeder during this time period just

before fledging, a pattern that I've seen repeatedly with all the other nestings as well. We decided that it was the chickadee equivalent of going to a fast food restaurant to feed voracious teenagers. The chicks fledged at between two and three weeks from the time of hatching, by the middle of April. Sadly, we didn't see it happen; the box was just strangely quiet and deserted one morning when I went to check it. Happily, within a few days a new pair had moved into the box.

Sue saw her Oak Titmice fledge and actually caught it on videotape. She was trying to videotape the nestlings looking out of the nest box hole and all of a sudden they began popping out and flying to nearby branches. She told me that the parents would fly at the fledglings almost to the point of seeming mean, apparently in an attempt to keep them moving and herd them in a particular direction. Scrub Jays, in particular, pose a serious threat to the chicks, and the parents were well aware of that.

My husband and I had read that it is important to remove the old nest materials before a new pair move in because mites can get established in the old nest and attack the nestlings. We hadn't acted quickly enough this first time, surprised to get new tenants so soon, so we ended up cleaning the nest box after having seen another pair already bringing nesting material into the box. The interruption didn't phase them at all, they pulled out some of the shavings we put in, then continued working on their nest.

After the first chicks fledged, the whole family disappeared from our yard for a couple of weeks. I was disappointed. I had wanted to see the fledglings. Then all of a sudden, we had many visits to our yard by a group that I presumed to be our chickadee family: two adults and six (!) youngsters. How they ever fit that whole group into the nest box I will never know. I could tell which were youngsters and which were adults because the adults were still stuffing suet into the juveniles, and the juveniles had chickadee calls that weren't quite right. They kept these baby calls for weeks, long after they were visiting the feeders on their own. I wondered if the parents had been teaching the fledglings how to get insects before they

taught them about bird feeders (like when my brother, Al learned to be a cook in the Coast Guard---they taught him how to make everything from scratch, then when he went out on ships all of a sudden he had mixes and frozen or canned prepared foods).

Our second batch of chickadees fledged in June, and we had groups of young chickadees visiting our feeders for the rest of the summer. They retained their baby voices for a long time, so I could always tell when they were around. In addition they would visit the peanut feeder in groups with several perching on it at once, something adult chickadees don't seem to do. The whole nest box experience was very satisfying for us, giving us a rather proud, grandparent sort of feeling, very different than the usual birding experience.

I should mention that I did stoop to the point of chasing off and scolding Scrub

Jays that tried to harass the chickadees during their nesting. So much for letting nature take its course. They seemed to handle the jays pretty well on their own, though, giving agitated alarm calls and refusing to approach the nest box while the jays were around. Each time the jays seemed to lose interest in just a few minutes and then the chickadees would go about their business. Occasionally jays would try to figure out a way to perch near the nest box hole, but due to the box design and placement, they were not able to do so. For tips on nest box design and placement, read on. (*See the "how-to" article on Page 10*).

## Attention, Birders: School Is In!

Maryann Danielson's Sunbeam Ecology Explorations will offer the very popular beginning and intermediate birding classes once again this Winter and Spring at Little House, 800 Middle Ave. in Menlo Park. There will be 14 slide-lecture sessions for each class, at a fee of \$75, and seven field trips for an additional fee.

BIRDING BASICS, for beginning and less skilled intermediate birders, will meet on Wednesday evenings, 7:30 - 9:30 PM, starting January 7. Winter birds, particularly waterbirds and raptors, will be highlighted from January through March. With the return of breeding land birds, emphasis will shift to study of birds in breeding mode, including avian biology, bird identification and life style.

FOLLOWING BIRDS THROUGH WINTER AND SPRING meets on Monday evenings, 7:30 - 9:30, starting Jan. 5 for intermediate and more advanced birders. Wintering waterbirds will be the focus of the class until Spring, when emphasis will shift to study of courtship and breeding, vocalizations, visual identification, and behavior of local nesting species.

Register for each class at the first session. Join the legions of local birders who have learned their birding basics, honed their identification skills, and started long-lasting friendships in Maryann's bird classes.

## A Reader's Re- minder: Bluebird, Titmouse Boxes Go Up Now

Editor:

The dedicated volunteers who are placing bluebird boxes around the county should not be discouraged by a lack of Plain (Oak) Titmice and Chestnut-backed Chickadees in the nest boxes. The boxes were not in place when these species begin to breed. Locally, the Oak Titmouse begins to sing and search for a nest hole in January, and most begin to build the nest in early February. The chickadees nest about a month later. We have had these species breeding in our yard [in Los Altos] in "bluebird-size" boxes since the 1950's. I'm sure that they'll be present on the bluebird trail this year if there are boxes in place along the edge of the oak woodland at least by early January.

—Ruth Troetschler

# Field Notes

by Bill Bousman

## Loons through Waterfowl

The first **Common Loons** of the season showed up late in the month with one at the Palo Alto estuary on 26 Nov (SCR), one at Shoreline Lake on 27 Nov (TGr, FV) and two at Calero Reservoir on 30 Nov (AV). The **Red-necked Grebe** on Shoreline Lake has remained throughout the month of November (v.ob.) and is the longest stay we have had for this species. Surprising was a second bird found on Lake Cunningham on 30 Nov (SRv *et al.*). An adult **Pelagic Cormorant** was found foraging in the Alviso salt ponds on 9 Nov (PJM, FrT) for our fifth county record. This coastal bird is rarely found inland. A scattering of **American Bittern** reports include a single bird on the north side of Salt Pond A9 in Alviso on 2 Nov (MiF), one at the Mountain View Forebay on 8 Nov (MD *fide* LCh), one along Guadalupe Slough on 9 Nov (PJM, FrT), and one on the Guadalupe River above Trimble on 22 Nov (MJM). Six **Cattle Egrets** were found roosting on an island in Salt Pond A16 in Alviso on 9 Nov (PJM, FrT). An immature **Greater White-fronted Goose** that has joined the Palo Alto Duck Pond club was seen again in late November (m.ob.). Another immature at Hellyer County Park on 1 Nov (AV) appears so habituated to the domestic geese there that its status is unclear. The **Wood Duck** count at Almaden Reservoir on 29 Nov (AV) was only 30 birds, well down from recent years. A male in the Palo Alto Flood Control Basin (FCB) on 9 Nov (PJM, FrT) was well away from normal wintering areas. Single male **Eurasian Wigeon** were in the Mountain View Forebay on 8 Nov (NL) and the Sunnyvale Water Pollution Control Plant (WPCP) ponds on 9 Nov (PJM, FrT) but two males were on Charleston Slough on 29 Nov (NL) and three were counted in the outer Palo Alto FCB on 30 Nov (MJM, NL). Four to six **Blue-winged Teal** were seen 1 - 8 Nov (MiF, PMB) in the North Pond of the Palo Alto FCB. The peak count of wintering **Redhead** in their usual

Palo Alto FCB haunts was of 32 on 27 Nov (MJM). The number of **Barrow's Goldeneyes** on Shoreline Lake has built up during November with a peak of five counted on 26 Nov (SCR). Good numbers of **Hooded Mergansers** have been found at the Oka percolation ponds with 25 counted on 22 Nov (JF). A male on Coit Lake in Henry Coe SP on 9 Nov (JY, AL) is the first record for the park.

## Hawks through Owls

More **Osprey** appear to be wintering locally this year. Two were at Coyote Reservoir on 5 Nov (ECu, JG) and one

*The first record of a  
Prairie Warbler along the  
Guadalupe River over-  
shadowed the second record of  
a Laughing Gull at the  
Palo Alto Duck Pond*

was seen there on 12 Nov (RWR *et al.*). A single bird was on Vasona Reservoir on 9 Nov (JD), another appears to be fairly regular at the Ogier Avenue ponds 9-20 Nov (v.ob.), and one was at the Parkway Lakes on 20 Nov (MJM). The first **Bald Eagle** of the season was an adult at Coyote Reservoir on 5 Nov (ECu, JG) and 12 Nov (RWR *et al.*). **Ferruginous Hawks** were well reported this month from typical locales. An adult and two immatures soaring over the San Jose Airport with Red-tails on 24 Nov (SCR, SBT) was an unusual concentration. Although uncommon, **Wild Turkeys** are widespread in the Diablo Range. However, six along Coyote Creek at Shady Oaks Park in San Jose on 7 Nov (MJM) were in an unusual location. **Black Rails** were found in unprecedented numbers at the Palo Alto Baylands on 14 - 15 Nov (v.ob.) with as many as seven recorded. Four more were seen on 26 Nov (SCR) on a rain-augmented tide. Very rare in the winter, a **Lesser Yellowlegs** was found at Charles-

ton Slough on 22 Nov (SAG *et al.*). A **Ruddy Turnstone** found on Salt Pond A9 in Alviso on 1 Nov (MJM) was probably the bird found there two days earlier and reported last month. Fitting their normal pattern as our latest of the rare calidrids three **Pectoral Sandpipers** were seen at the Coyote Creek Riparian Station (CCRS) waterbird pond on 2 Nov (NL). **Common Snipe** numbers are variable from year to year anywhere in the county. The 89 counted on Coyote Reservoir on 9 Nov (MMR, MJM), however, are exceptional. An immature **Laughing Gull** found on 29 Nov (TGr) at the Palo Alto Duck Pond is only the second record for the county. The news spread quickly and this rare gull was enjoyed by many. The adult **Lesser Black-backed Gull**, back at the Alviso Marina for its third winter, was last reported on 2 Nov (AV). The immature at Lake Cunningham has been seen regularly throughout the month (SCR, v.ob.) and remains a difficult identification problem with respect to a number of Asian gulls that have not previously been recorded on the west coast. An adult **Glaucous Gull** found on Salt Pond

A16 in Alviso on 19 Nov (SCR) shows some possible hybrid characters with **Glaucous-winged Gull**. The peak count of **Black Skimmers** at Charleston Slough was of 17 on 9 Nov (PJM, FrT). It's been a good month for **Short-eared Owls**. One bird was seen in the Palo Alto FCB on 1 Nov (MiF) and nearby on 8 Nov (PMB, RLe). Another was seen on Alviso Slough on 9 Nov (PJM, FrT), 17 Nov and 20 Nov (both TR). Finally, the high tide provided good looks at a bird at the Palo Alto Baylands on 15 Nov (MJM, JAC).

## Woodpeckers through Phainopepla

A single **Lewis' Woodpecker** was at the upper end of Grizzly Gulch in Henry Coe SP on 9 Nov (JY, AL) and is a dispersant. Two birds in the San Antonio Valley on 11 Nov (MMR) are in an area where they breed. A male **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker**, returning to Ed Levin CP for its fourth winter, was first found on 1 Nov (MJM) and seen throughout the

## Field Notes *continued*

month (v.ob.). Another adult male was found along Canada Road on 9 Nov (MMR, MJM). Another returning bird is the **Eastern Phoebe** at Shady Oaks Park in San Jose. It has returned for its fifth winter and was first seen on 7 Nov (MJM). This is the earliest it has been found in its five winters. Most of our **Cassin's Vireos** have left by the end of August so a bird found on the Guadalupe River at Montague on 4 Nov (NL) is very late. Also exceptionally late was a **Barn Swallow** at Charleston Slough on 22 Nov (SAG *et al.*). A **House Wren** along Coyote Creek above Hellyer Avenue on 3 Nov (MJM) may be a wintering bird. We have had little sign of the montane species that invaded last winter but two **Townsend's Solitaires** were more than normal. The first was found along Adobe Creek in Los Altos Hills on 4 Nov (SCR) and the second was over Hwy 17 in Los Gatos on 24 Nov (SBT *fide* SCR). A female **Phainopepla** in San Antonio Valley on 11 Nov (MMR) is the only one found so far this winter.

### Warblers through Grosbeaks

A **Nashville Warbler** was found along the Guadalupe River above Montague on 30 Nov (SCR). **Yellow Warblers** in November do not a winter make, yet the number of birds present this fall suggest we will again see unusual numbers this winter. One bird was found along the Guadalupe River near Montague on both 2 Nov (MJM) and 4 Nov (NL). This may be a bird returning to an area where one wintered last year. Single birds were also on Homestead in Santa Clara over most of the month (SCR) as well as at the Sunnyvale Baylands Park on 4 and 19 Nov (SBT *fide* SCR). Finally, one found along Artesian Slough near the Alviso EEC on 9 Nov (PJM, FrT) is probably returning for its third winter. It was found there again on 21 Nov (SCR), 23 Nov (BMcK), and 26 Nov (SCR, SBT). The **Magnolia Warbler** found last month on the Guadalupe River above Montague was last seen there on 2 Nov (MJM). Two **Black-throated Gray Warblers** were found during the month and also may be win-

tering birds. An immature female was along Adobe Creek in Los Altos Hills on 4 Nov (SCR) and another bird was found across the valley at Smith Creek on 11 Nov (MMR). The warbler prize of the season, though, was a **Prairie Warbler** found along the Guadalupe River below I-880 on 21 Nov (SCR) and seen through the end of the month. This is the first record for the county. A female **Western Tanager** was along the Guadalupe River just above Montague on 30 Nov (SCR). The November high tide revealed at least one **Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow** at the Palo Alto Baylands on 14 Nov (MMR, SCR). A single **Swamp Sparrow** was found on 27 Nov (MJM) near Matadero Creek in the Palo Alto FCB. Wintering **White-throated Sparrows** include an immature at Shady Oaks Park on 7 Nov (MJM), a bird apparently returning to a Los Gatos feeder on 10 Nov (JD), another along the Guadalupe River near Montague on 22 Nov (NL), and one at McClellan Ranch Park on 23 Nov (CIW). A single **Lapland Longspur** was at the Sierra Road summit on 2 Nov (NL), an area where they've wintered before. A **Black-headed Grosbeak** found along the Guadalupe River near Montague on 4 Nov (NL) is either very late or wintering in the area. A single **Lawrence's Goldfinch** north of San Antone Junction on 11 Nov (MMR) was the only report this month.

*Observers: Phyllis Browning (PMB), Les Chibana (LCh), Jack Cole (JAC), Emily Curtis (ECu), Marianne Dieckmann (MD), Jean Dubois (JD), Mike Feighner (MiF), Jeff Finger (JF), Jane Glass (JG), Tom Grey (TGr), Steve Glover (SAG), Rosalie Lefkowitz (RLe), Nick Lethaby (NL), Amy Lauterbach (AL), Mike Mammoser (MJM), Bert McKee (BMcK), Peter Metropulos (PJM), Bob Reiling (RWR), Mike Rogers (MMR), Steve Rottenborn (SCR), Steve Rovell (SRv), Tom Ryan (TR), Scott Terrill (SBT), Francis Toldi (FrT), Frank Vanslager (FV), Ann Verdi (AV), Claire Wolfe (CIW), and James Yurchenco (JY).*

**RARITIES**---Please drop me a note: Bill Bousman, 321 Arlington Way, Menlo Park, CA 94025, or: bousman@merlin.arc.nasa.gov

## SFBBO Offers Carrizo Plains/Morro Bay Field Trip in February

San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory is offering a Carrizo Plains/Morro Bay Field Trip February 20 - 22 at a cost of \$35 for members, \$50 for non-members (includes membership). Co-leader Tom Ryan provides the following description and itinerary:

This unique region is the winter home of more than 200 species of birds. The central coast allows access to avifauna that overwinter in California's inland AND coastal regions. We will begin our adventures at the Carrizo Plain, a remnant of the valley grassland ecosystem with its many unique plant communities which have survived or been re-introduced to this special area. We will search the grasslands and scrub for Vesper, Lark and Sage Sparrow, and visit Soda Lake, winter home to a flock of Sandhill Cranes. This area is also favored by wintering raptors such as Rough-legged and Ferruginous Hawks, Golden Eagle, Merlin and Prairie Falcon. Mountain Plover, Lewis' Woodpecker, and even Northern Shrike are exciting possibilities here.

We will spend Sunday morning in the Morro Bay area looking for seabirds, shorebirds and waterfowl, including loons, Brant, scoters, and rarities such as Eurasian Wigeon. The afternoon will be spent at lovely Montana del Oro State Park searching the rocky shoreline for Wandering Tattler, Black and Ruddy Turnstones, and Black Oystercatcher.

Our goal is to provide the beginning birder with an excellent introduction to many of Central California's unique birds and their habitats, while offering experienced birders a great opportunity to view hard-to-find species. All participants can look forward to an enjoyable, friendly birding experience, tales of adventure, and new companions. Gjon Hazard will co-lead. Transportation, meals and lodging are not provided; the trip fees go to support SFBBO's research program. For itinerary, checklist, maps and registration materials, contact Tom Ryan at SFBBO (408) 946-6548 or WTSwift@aol.com.

# Bay, Delta Changes Ahead? from Page 1

airport project can't be stopped, at least it may spell the beginning of the end of salt production, and the furthering of a restoration mentality we will inevitably acquire.

## Decision Day in the Delta

Early spring should see the release of a massive volume of environmental documentation surrounding the devastation/restoration/politicization of the Delta. The "CalFed" process—so named because of the leadership of both governments—will use those documents to decide much of California's water future.

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of those documents and the decisions that will follow. Millions are already being spent and more than \$1,000,000,000 is earmarked to begin the reversal of fortune for the fisheries, wetlands, riparian areas and other wildlife habitats comprising the west coast of North America's largest estuary and its tributaries. If all goes as planned, it will become the largest restoration project ever attempted, surpassing even that of the Florida Everglades.

Of course, there's a catch. The vast majority of those funds will only be released upon approval of a plan for moving forward not only with ecosystem restoration but with a program to continue

and perhaps increase the ability of the State and Federal governments to remove millions of acre feet of water from the Delta and the rivers that feed it. Considering that the removal of such a volume of water is what got us to the sorry state we are in ecologically, the environmental community is understandably wary of the deal being forged. Two simplified versions of our potential futures look like this:

1) an honest attempt is made to reform water rights, pricing, delivery, and consumption and to balance the needs of California's growing population with the need to restore a remarkable ecosystem; or

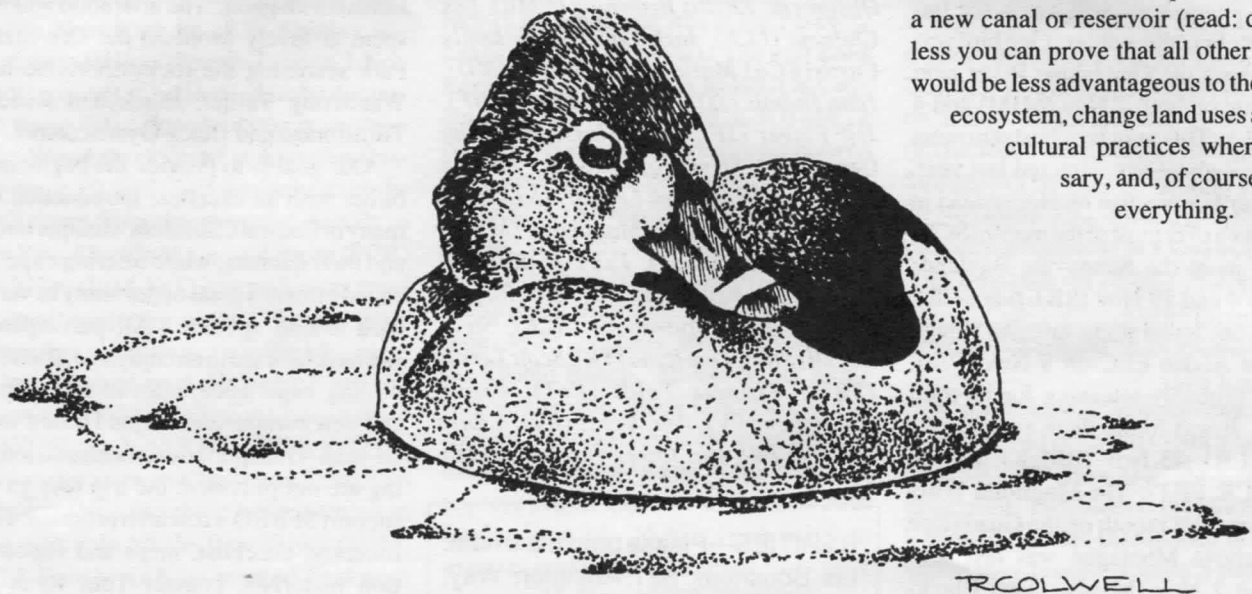
2) the environment and environmentalists are bribed with insufficient restoration dollars into living with a decision that increases the ability of agricultural and urban areas to slake their unending thirst, leaving just enough water and habitat in the Delta to stave off complete collapse while continuing the "Stupidity First" water policies of the past.

The results to date have me worried. Most importantly, John Garamendi, Undersecretary of the Interior Department and Clinton frontman on these matters recently issued a pathetic decision on implementation of the

Central Valley Project Improvement Act (CVPIA). Passed in 1992 and signed by George Bush, the CVPIA was intended to transfer 800,000 acre feet of water from the government's water system to Delta fisheries. Garamendi's decision falls far short of that goal, and allows ridiculous outcomes such as using restoration money to buy water for farmers. If that's the way the government follows the law, we have a great deal to be concerned with regarding how they will abide by a deal worked out in the CalFed process.

Our Chapter's role in this is a small but important one. Our Armchair Activists have been asked to write on these issues more than once, and they will likely be asked to do so again. Recently another activist told me that in one instance more letters came in from SCVAS than from any other group in the state. Well done! (To join them, call me at (408)252-3748.) In addition, I am working with a host of other environmental advocates in an attempt to form policy positions and a campaign strategy on key issues (e.g., will there be a new Peripheral Canal?). Finally, I'm pushing the Santa Clara Valley Water District to change some of their policy positions while protecting their core interests.

Our position on the big issues goes like this: Maximize water efficiency in agriculture and urban consumption, don't build a new canal or reservoir (read: dam) unless you can prove that all other avenues would be less advantageous to the Delta's ecosystem, change land uses and agricultural practices where necessary, and, of course, restore everything.



*The Ring-necked Duck inhabits inland bays, lakes and reservoirs. Decisions regarding water usage affect this and many other bird species. Drawing by Rita Colwell*



# U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Announces Marbled Murrelet Recovery Plan

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has released a final plan for Marbled Murrelet recovery that is already well on the way to implementation.

"We're hitting the ground running with this recovery plan," said Michael Spear, regional director of the Service's six-state Pacific region. "The Northwest Forest Plan is the backbone of our recovery strategy. It provides protection for all known occupied murrelet nesting sites on Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management lands."

The Marbled Murrelet, a small diving seabird that occurs along the north Pacific coast from the Aleutian Islands and southern Alaska south to central California, was listed as threatened in California, Oregon, and Washington in 1992 under the Federal Endangered Species Act. Critical habitat for the murrelet was designated in 1996, identifying areas on both Federal and non-federal lands as critical to conserving the species.

The goal of the Endangered Species Act is to recover species to levels where protection under the act is no longer necessary. Recovery plans, which are blueprints for actions by Federal and state agencies and private organizations, do not obligate the expenditure of funds or require the actions be implemented.

Many tasks outlined in the final recovery plan are already being undertaken. In addition to protection of known occupied nest sites through the Northwest Forest Plan, the recovery plan anticipates that substantial amounts of new suitable habitat will be developed over the long-term through the late-successional reserve system of the Forest Plan.

On non-federal lands, several habitat conservation plans have been completed which address the needs of Marbled Murrelets, including one for Oregon's Elliot State Forest, which covers approximately 93,000 acres in

Douglas and Coos counties, and one for the Washington Department of Natural Resources, covering nearly 1.3 million acres in western Washington.

The recovery plan delineates six conservation zones within the three states, identifies essential habitat areas for protection in both the marine and terrestrial environments, and calls for conserving habitat, primarily through implementation of the Northwest Forest Plan, designated critical habitat, and habitat conservation plans. Other components of the recovery plan include developing and implementing landscape management strategies to stabilize murrelet populations and improve habitat conditions, and conducting research and monitoring to gather additional information to develop more specific de-listing criteria.

The Marbled Murrelet lives almost exclusively in the near-shore marine environment, feeding primarily on fish and invertebrates. It nests only in forests with old-growth characteristics such as large trees, multi-storied stand, and moderate to high closure of trees overhead, within 50 miles of the marine environment.

The greatest threat to the murrelet is the loss and modification of its nesting habitat, which has decreased substantially due to timber harvest, natural and human-caused fires, and losses to wind storms. It takes 100 to 250 years to grow nesting habitat. Loss of habitat can lead directly to reduced reproductive rates, and habitat modifications may cause similar results indirectly by allowing increased predation, which reduces the number of fledglings that actually survive.

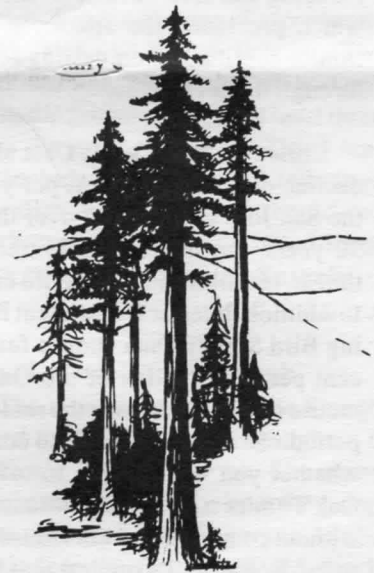
The Marbled Murrelets's specific nesting habitat requirements and a naturally low reproductive rate hamper the population's ability to rapidly increase in number in response to improved conditions. It lays only one egg per nest, nests only once per sea-

son, and not all adults nest every year. The murrelet is believed to live an average of 10 years and does not reach sexual maturity until at least two to three years of age.

At sea, the murrelet population contains a very low percentage of juvenile birds, which indicates the population is declining. The Washington, Oregon, and California populations are likely declining at four to seven percent per year.

Additional threats to the species include oil spills and net fisheries in the murrelet's marine habitat.

—from US F & WS report.



Leah Schwartz

*Old-growth forests such as the redwood stand shown here in the Marin Audubon logo are critical to the nesting success of the Marbled Murrelet. The Santa Cruz Mountains remain a local stronghold of this species.*

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# About Backyard Nest Boxes

The main design element to consider when selecting or building a house for chickadees and titmice is the entrance hole size. The rest of the nest box dimensions and construction details recommended in books on the subject are fairly standard. However, some books recommend 1 1/8 inch for chickadees and 1 1/4 inch for titmice, and at least one recommends 1 1/8 inch for both species. My friend Sue, who has had Oak Titmice nest in a box in her yard, noticed that the Oak Titmice were able to fit through the 1 1/8 inch opening and were building a nest in the box, but pecked at the hole, apparently trying to enlarge it. After Sue obligingly enlarged the entrance hole to 1 1/4 inch, she observed House Sparrows looking in the opening and investigating the nest box. This induced her to put a mask over the hole effectively reducing the size back to 1 1/8 inch, which precluded the sparrows. The titmice continued their nesting activity through these changes.

Christmas Bird Count Data show a decline of about 4 percent per year in the San Jose count circle over the last 30 years, but no detectable trends in the Mt. Hamilton and Palo Alto circles. In addition, Interior Department Breeding Bird Survey Data show a few percent per year decline of the Oak Titmouse in California over the same time period. So it is worthwhile to consider whether you will be able to offer the Oak Titmice a 1 1/4 inch entrance hole without competition from House Sparrows. Some books suggest that House Sparrows can be discouraged by repeatedly removing their nesting material. Other cavity nesters can also be attracted to this larger size opening including nuthatches and wrens.

Choosing a site for the nest box is extremely important. It was suggested on the directions that came with one of the boxes we purchased that it receive sun for roughly half the day. Our successful box is located in a spot where

it receives late morning and noon sun and afternoon shade. I have seen other successful boxes that were in light shade all day. Not providing a perch either on the box itself or right next to it is also very important because this keeps predator birds such as the jays from being able to land in a convenient spot to stick their heads into nest box holes or otherwise disrupt nesting activities. Our chickadees could deal with some jay aggression, but we suspect that they would not stay with a nest box location that provided easy access for jay attacks.

It is important to place the box where it will be safe from four-legged predators. Our successful box is mounted on an exterior porch wall, where it would be difficult for any climbing animals such as cats, raccoons or rodents to reach it. A second box in our yard that was successfully used one time is hanging from a sturdy tree branch in a position that is sufficiently far away from other tree branches so as to be out of the reach of predators. Sue has her nest boxes mounted on poles, with baffles on the poles to keep animals from climbing up. She found out through an unfortunate experience of having a nest of titmice disappear overnight that it is important to keep branches trimmed well away from the nest box locations. A secondary but important consideration in locating nest boxes is visibility from your house. It is very rewarding and entertaining to be able to view nesting activities from windows, and this makes it more convenient to monitor the boxes, especially for elderly or disabled bird watchers.

It seems to be a good idea to put a layer of small non-aromatic wood chips or shavings in the bottom of the box for chickadees and titmice to remove. As mentioned in the above article, the birds seem to think they are excavating the cavity. As careful as they often are to dispose of the chips in various locations away from the nest, they usually

still drop enough to be visible - a tell-tale sign that nesting activity has begun. Even though chickadees appear to be excellent housekeepers, it is important to remove the nesting material when the nestlings have fledged in order to get rid of mites that may have gotten a foothold in the nesting material and which could attack the next batch of nestlings. The box should be completely swept out and new wood shavings put in.

One thing that has very entertaining results, is to put out nesting materials for the birds. A suet basket is a handy way to do this, or just using the wire "twisty ties" to fasten the materials to branches around the yard. Cat hair is ideal, as is sphagnum peat moss. Other types of hair, plant down, and cotton stuffing out of chairs (natural materials are best) may also be accepted. Watching birds collecting these materials is very entertaining. Putting out suet toward the end of the nesting cycle gives chickadees and titmice a "fast food" option when feeding voracious youngsters that are just about to fledge. It is important not to let it spoil in warm weather. I keep blocks of suet in the freezer and only put out portions of blocks at a time to minimize spoilage.

One final note is that it is a good idea to keep records about the nesting activities in your yard. You will then be able to compare the timing of nesting activities in your yard from year to year. In addition SCVAS is interested in receiving data on the timing of nesting activities of cavity nesters in Santa Clara County. The very successful Bluebird Nest Box program started by SCVAS last year turned out to benefit many other cavity nesters including titmice and chickadees. SCVAS is keeping records on these nestings and we would like to include data from any other nest boxes in the county as well. Please send any such information to the SCVAS Chapter Office. Good luck and have fun!!

-----Leda Beth Gray

## Field Trip Reports

### Nov. 12, Coyote Reservoir

Today at Coyote Reservoir we had one adult Bald Eagle, 2 - 3 Golden Eagles (three sightings of 1, 2, 1), one adult Osprey, one adult Ferruginous Hawk (Roop Rd. south of park entrance), one Spotted Sandpiper (upstream edge of dam), one Rock Wren (calling, viewed on the upstream side of the dam), 6 - 8 Ring-necked Ducks, and 10 - 12 Common Snipe and the south end of the lake under brush. The "island" near the dam previously referred to by Mike Rogers is now part of the shoreline.

—Bob Reiling

### Dec. 3, Grant Ranch Co. Park

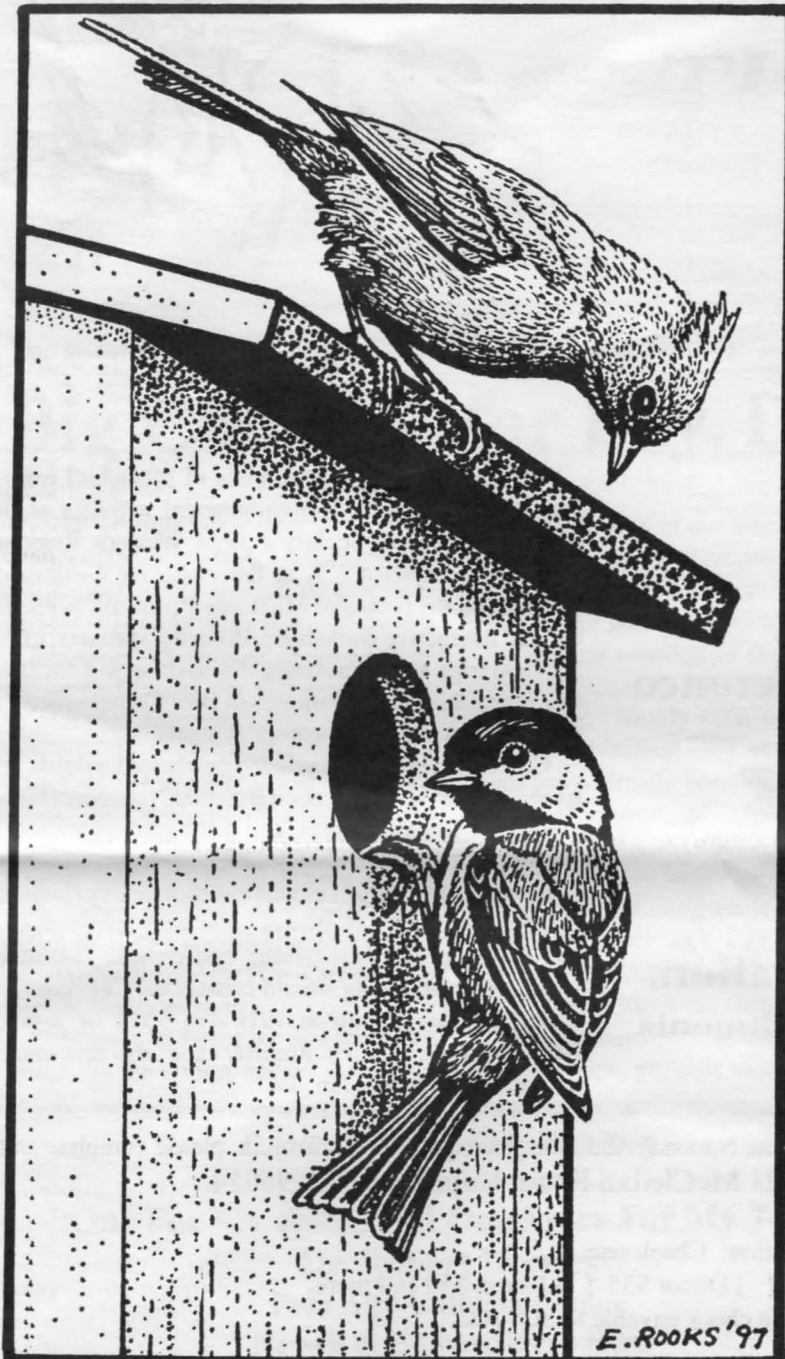
Although birding was slow on today's SCVAS trip, the wind brought out at least two Golden Eagles (interacting, with at least one overhead most of the morning), one Ferruginous Hawk, and one Prairie Falcon. The latter two were in the same view at one point; the falcon was seen at least three times during the morning. Other raptors included numerous Red-tails (one very dark morph), a Red-shouldered Hawk, a couple of White-tailed Kites and a couple of American Kestrels.

-----Bob Reiling

### Dec. 6, Charleston Slough

The monthly outing to the Slough turned up the following highlights: 6 Barrow's Goldeneye on Shoreline Lake; one Say's Phoebe near the pump house; one American Bittern in Adobe Creek near the first bench; 15 Black Skimmers on an island in the Slough near the second bench; one Peregrine Falcon on a stake in the Flood Control Basin; one male Ring-necked in Adobe Creek near the pump house; and one swallow (species undetermined). Numerous other commonly seen ducks, shorebirds, and raptors were also enjoyed by all.

-----Nick Yatsko



*The delightfully inquisitive Oak Titmouse and Chestnut-backed Chickadee mentioned in Leda Beth Gray's nestbox articles are pictured here as drawn by Edward Rooks. Ed is one of California's most talented wildlife artists and a great friend of SCVAS. Prints of his beautiful bird and wildlife portraits are available for viewing and purchase in the SCVAS Nature Shop.*

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Confirmed speakers included celebrated wildlife artist and conservationist Robert Bateman, renowned birder and author Kenn Kaufman, and distinguished photographer and naturalist Arnold Small.

As one of California's largest and most active Audubon chapters, SCVAS has always been well-represented at this dynamic and entertaining conference. Members interested in attending should contact the Cal-Audubon office in Sacramento at (916)481-5332 or e-mail: [jjacobs@audubon.org](mailto:jjacobs@audubon.org). Register early; also save money by registering before Jan. 19.

Membership: We invite your membership in the National Audubon Society/SCVAS. To join, please complete and mail this form with payment to: **SCVAS, 22221 McClellan Road, Cupertino, CA 95014.**

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