



THE AVOCET

The Newsletter of the Santa Clara Audubon Society

April 2001

Birdathon to Support New Education Position

by *Craig Breon*
Executive Director

Spring is here, love is in the air . . . and so are lots of great birds! Every spring Audubon chapters around the nation host annual Birdathons—a fun way to raise money for their chapters. SCVAS is no exception, and this year we have an ambitious effort to fund: our new environmental education staff position.

Historically, SCVAS' Education Committee has run on volunteer power alone. When our Board recently set long-term goals, it included hiring staff to expand and improve upon our many existing education programs—from wetlands field trips for schoolkids to adult beginner birding classes. We also hope to launch education programs for the southern portion of our county, but currently we lack the resources and staff to extend ourselves that far.

Last year for the first time we were able to hire Ulrike Keyssner, our half-time Volunteer Coordinator, for an additional one-quarter time to work on educa-

tion programs. Now the SCVAS Board has decided to make the position full-time: 50% volunteer coordination and 50% education programs. It's another bold step in the growth of our chapter, and it means we have to raise the funding to support the position.

Here's Where You Come In

If you are interested in joining a Birdathon team this year, or if you would like to form a team of your own, you can help. (A list of existing teams and contact numbers is on Page 5.) You can call one of them up and ask to join their team, or to contribute financially to their team's efforts.

Better yet, form a team of your own. Gather a few friends or co-workers together, pick a name and then a date when you'll bird the creeks, wetlands, and open spaces of Santa Clara County (or your favorite open space preserve, or your own neighborhood). Teams generally get pledges from family and friends (e.g.,

one or two dollars for every species of bird found by your team) or just a set amount.

SCVAS' official Birdathon week is April 22 through the 29th. Teams are encouraged to pick a day during that week for their birding efforts. Appropriately, April 22 is Earth Day, and birding to support education programs would be a great way to celebrate. It's also the peak of the migration season for our little corner of the Pacific Flyway, so there should be a wealth of birding to enjoy.

Our chapter's goal for this year's Birdathon is twofold: to encourage our members to enjoy the wonders of wildlife that still fill Silicon Valley; and to help SCVAS take an important step into the future by serving the kids and adults of Santa Clara County. We hope you will join in this fun event for a good cause.

If you would like to show your financial support for our new environmental education position, you can always just send a donation straight to our office. Put in a small note saying that you want to support our education programs, and we will know that we are headed in the right direction. For more information, please contact us at the office at (408) 252-3747.

**General Membership Meeting
Wednesday, April 18
"African Predatory Mammals
and Birds of Prey"
with Doug Cheeseman
Palo Alto Art Center
Newell & Embarcadero Rds.
7:30 Hospitality 8:00 Program**

Doug Cheeseman has led 34 safaris to East and Central Africa and likes to focus on animal behavior, especially that of predatory mammals and raptors. Doug's two-projector slide show will feature mainly birds of prey, from the small insectivorous raptors to the many specialized species, such as the fascinating snake eagles of East Africa. He will also include some good action from the mammalian carnivores of Africa. Come early to get a good seat for our most popular and entertaining speaker!

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Volunteer Ventures

by Ulrike Keyssner



I love my job! My office is situated in an old ranch house in a beautiful natural setting along a creek; I often work outdoors, introducing kids to our local plants and animals; I get to be creative and I'm constantly learning new things. The best part of my job is meeting incredible people and having fun figuring out how they can help SCVAS. Here is one perfect example of how my job is made special because of volunteers:

In response to a request in February's *Avocet*, Bernard Wood called to offer his help editing a script I created for a slide show on Bay Area Birds. He came to the Ranch and we started talking. He told me he had editing and publishing experience, and naturally I was thrilled to have someone with experience take over the job. As we continued to talk, I could barely contain my excitement because it turns out that Bernard is an amateur videographer! (I've seen his work and there is nothing amateur about it.) I quickly requested him to forget the script-editing job, as important as it was. What I really needed from him was his skills behind a video camera, and I needed them in a few weeks! Bernard took a deep breath and plunged into the job. (This is why I love my job but the story gets even better.)

The job was to create two videos of our Wetlands Discovery Program (see story on page 4), one for training and the other for promotional purposes. I particularly wanted to create a detailed video of all the kids' activities in the classroom prior to the field trip, and then during the field trip, to show volunteers what to expect when working for this program.

Unfortunately, a personal situation developed and Bernard was unable to attend the first two days of the Wetlands program. He didn't let that stop him, however. He called a videographer friend, Gordon Peterson, and asked Gordon to cover for him. I was overwhelmed by both of their generosity and caring. Not only did Gordon video the first two days, he came on the third day when Bernard was back. (Sshh, don't tell Gordon, but my little brain was thinking, we now have two new volunteers working hard for us for the price of one! I love it when volunteers recruit volunteers.)

The news gets even better. Remember the slide script? Office volunteer Anne Creevy excitedly offered to edit it. She loves doing that kind of work and also has experience. She is taking it to the next level, adding information and changing the format so that it is much more accessible to people of all experience levels.

I'm happy to say we have two other new volunteers. Georgann Meadows has already completed a project for the office and is hard at work on a second. She loves Burrowing Owls and wants to help us with our upcoming

Burrowing Owl Fundraiser. If anyone else wants to help with this job please contact me. Retired schoolteacher Linda Johnson called me the week before our Wetlands Discovery Program started and volunteered to help us with the program, learning the ropes as she went. It turns out that Linda can teach us a thing or two about wetlands, and she was invaluable during the classroom activities and on the field trip. Ahh, I love it when volunteers go that extra mile and have fun, too; it makes my job really easy. Now you understand why I love my job!

Go ahead, make my day—contact me at (408) 249-1014 or e-mail me <Ulrike@scvas.org>
—Volunteer and Education Programs Coordinator.

New Plant Press for McClellan Ranch Park

by Ulrike Keyssner

SCVAS now has a McClellan Ranch Plant Press available to view in our library. A handful of volunteers and I collected plant samples last May and pressed them, evaporating the moisture for several months. None of us had previous experience but we learned as we pressed, and the results were very pleasing.

New volunteer Carole Foster took over the project and, after a lot of work and creativity, compiled a wonderful binder complete with pressed plant, color photograph, and accompanying details on the plants' ecology and uses by animals and humans. She added a table of contents, summary of local plant communities, and a glossary. She has created a wonderful resource for SCVAS volunteers, members, and local educators.

I wanted the Press so that we could use it to train and assist our field trip volunteers who lead walks around McClellan Ranch. Of course, the plants found along our riparian corridor and in our field are found throughout the county and the Press will help anyone with an interest in learning about plants. I'm happy to report Carole plans to add more species from the Park as they show themselves during the year.

If you have an interest in helping with the Press just contact me. By the way, we want to compile another press for wetland plants—any takers?



Meet Carole Foster who has created a wonderful resource for our volunteers

April 2001 Calendar

****Denotes field trip. On all trips carpool if possible; bring binoculars, field guides, layered clothing. LO=Lunch optional; RC = Heavy rain cancels.**

****Sunday Apr. 1, 8:30 AM**

Alum Rock Park

Leader: Al Eisner (Days, voice-mail (650) 926-2018, evenings (650) 364-3686). Please note change to Daylight Savings Time (no fooling): spring forward or be late. From Hwy 101 or I-680 take McKee Rd. northeast toward hills, then left on Toyon Ave. and right on Penitencia Creek Rd. and continue into park. Meet in "Rustic Lands" parking area, on right just before reaching "T" intersection. Moderately strenuous 3 to 4 mile walk, looking for resident breeding birds (possible Rufous-Crowned Sparrow and Canyon Wren), early migrants, lingering winter birds. Be prepared for some mud! Possible entrance fee; **LO RC**

****Wednesday Apr. 4, 8:00 AM**

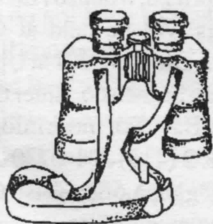
Rancho San Antonio OSP

Leader: Jim Liskovec (650) 969-5542. An extra weekday trip to this popular preserve. Emphasis on bird song. Expect some strenuous walking on hilly trails. From Hwy 280 take Foothill Expwy-Grant Rd. exit turning south onto Foothill Blvd. Turn right on Cristo Rey Dr., continue on to large parking area. Meet by restrooms. **LO, RC**

Wednesday Apr. 4, 7:30 PM

Bay Area Bird Photographers

will feature Mark Rauzon's "Tale of Two Crests," a slide program about the Crested Auklet and Double-crested Cormorant. Lucy Evans Baylands Interpretive Center, E. Embarcadero Rd., Palo Alto.



****Saturday Apr. 7, 9:00 AM**

Stevens Creek Co. Park

Half day. Leader: Roxie Handler (408) 730-1745. From I-280 in Cupertino take Foothill Expwy exit south 2.1 miles (becomes Stevens Canyon Rd.), turn left into first (Chestnut) park entrance and meet in first parking lot. One of the best riparian birding spots in the South Bay for migrants and local breeding birds. Possible \$4.00 entrance fee. **LO**

****Sunday Apr. 8, 9:00 AM**

Charleston Slough

Half day. Leader: Allen Royer (408) 288-7768. Meet at Terminal Way at the end of San Antonio Rd. north off Hwy. 101 in Mountain View. Trip will be geared toward the beginning birder.

Tuesday Apr. 10, 9:30 AM

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: Vaux's Swift.

****Wednesday Apr. 11, 8:30 AM**

Almaden Quicksilver Co. Park

Half day. Leader: Shirley Gordon (408) 996-9863. In San Jose take Almaden Expwy south to Almaden Rd. through town of New Almaden, turn right at park entrance. Spring woodland species should be active. Moderate walking of 3 miles. **LO, HRC**

****Saturday Apr. 14, 8:30 AM**

Almaden Quicksilver Co. Park

Leader: Shirley Gordon (408) 996-9863. (See directions under Apr. 11 listing.)

****Sunday Apr. 15, 8:30 AM**

Grant Ranch Co. Park

Half day. Leader: Dave Cook (408) 871-9552. From I-680 take Alum Rock Ave. northeast, turn right on Mt. Hamilton Rd., go approximately 9 miles to park. Meet at Hall's Valley Lake parking lot located on left, just past main park entrance. Fresh water ducks, oak woodland birds, possible Golden Eagle. Moderate 2-mile walk. **LO, RC**

****Saturday Apr. 21, 9:00 AM**

San Pedro Valley Co. Park

Half day. Leader: Judy Spittler (650) 355-9362. From Hwy. 92 in Half Moon Bay take Hwy 1 north to Linda Mar Blvd in Pacifica. Turn right, drive to end of street; jog to right, then left into parking area near museum. Possible highlights include Winter Wren and Rufous Hummingbird. Entrance fee for cars. **RC** (in event of rain in Santa Clara Co., check local weather forecasts as conditions in coastal San Mateo can be vastly different).

****Sunday Apr. 22, 8:30 AM**

Jasper Ridge Biological Preserve, Stanford University

Half day. Leader: Leda Beth Gray (831) 336-1127. Trip limited to 16 participants by reservation only. \$5 fee per person. Be at Preserve gate between 7:45 AM and 8:00 AM only. (DO NOT ARRIVE EARLIER AS PARKING OUTSIDE GATE POSES TRAFFIC HAZARD!) From I-280 take Sand Hill Rd. west 2 miles to main gate on left. Moderately strenuous walking, 2-3 miles. Trip goes rain or shine.

****Wednesday April 25, 8:30 AM**

Stevens Creek Co. Park

Leader: Roxie Handler (408) 730-1745. From Hwy. 280 take Foothill Rd. south about 2 miles. Turn left into Chestnut parking area. This is a wonderful place for spring birding. Possible entry fee. **RC**

****Saturday Apr. 28, 8:15 AM**

Ed Levin County Park (North)

Half day. Leader: Bob Reiling (408) 253-7527. Take Hwy 237 east, crossing I-880 and I-680 (becomes Calaveras Rd.), turn left on Downing Rd. to park entrance. Meet at parking lot on far northeast side of Sandy Wool Lake. Migrants and local breeding birds in Milpitas' prime birding hotspot. Be aware that the trail is steep in some places. Entrance fee. **LO**

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Wetlands Discovery Program Takes School Kids For a Ride

By Ulrike Keyssner

We have had a busy month with the starting up of the Wetlands Discovery Program. Devised by SCVAS, this program introduces 4th and 5th-grade students to wetlands ecology. The program begins in the classroom where hands-on activities guide students through lessons about wetland plants and animals, and the ways people use them. Students are then taken on a field trip to Alviso or Charleston Slough to experience the real thing. Although the curriculum discusses many of the different plant and animal species, birds are a highlight of the program, and being able to use our loaner binoculars makes the experience all the more valuable for the kids.

SCVAS volunteers staff the program from the classroom to the field trip. Special mention goes to Elaine Gould, who has worked tirelessly to set up the 2001 schedule and training. Without her guidance and assistance the program would not have gotten off to such a great start. Anne Creevy, Linda Johnson, Jim Liskovec, Margie Miller, Bob Lemon, Mayuri Naito, Jennifer Peritz and Jerry Towner were also invaluable in leading the children through the activities and field trip. As usual, without our fabulous volunteers we could not reach into the community as much as we do.

The Wetlands Discovery Program is in great demand from local schools, and we want to offer it to more classes. However, we have two limiting factors. One is staffing and the other is transportation. We need more volunteers to rotate through the schedule and more funding to pay for the buses that take kids to the wetlands. With appeals to our membership we can enlist volunteers who can be trained to staff the program, and with careful scheduling we can meet our commitments to the kids and not ask too much of each volunteer.



Mayuri Naito photographed Ulrike Keyssner helping one of the students participating in the Wetlands and Woodlands program.

If you are interested I urge you to plunge in and offer your services. Don't let concerns over lack of experience stop you—we will train you in a matter of hours and pair you with an experienced leader. Our program is designed for volunteers to help children find their own answers by guiding the students with leading questions. Volunteers work in pairs and are supported by the teacher and several parents. Help distribute the work, please call me!

If you would like to support the program but don't have the time to volunteer, please consider sponsoring a bus. It costs \$200 per bus to shuttle 70 students to and from the wetlands. This is a major expense for us and often limits the number of field trips we conduct. Many schools cannot afford to go on field trips because of this cost. Also, if your company sponsors programs such as ours, please contact us and we'll send a brochure and cover letter describing it in detail. We have a goal of expanding the program this year and ask your help to achieve it. Phone (408) 252-3747 or e-mail <Ulrike@scvas.org>.

Raptor Group Seeks Volunteers

Tens of thousands of hawks, falcons, and eagles pass over the Marin Headlands each autumn, and in autumn 2000, more than 260 volunteers helped monitor this flight for the Golden Gate Raptor Observatory.

Since 1983, the GGRO has organized volunteers to conduct ground counts, banding and radiotracking studies in order to monitor the health of our region's birds of prey. We're currently looking for new adult volunteers to commit to one day every two weeks for the August through December 2001 season, along with some weekend and evening trainings in July. Come to one of three Recruitment Classes to see if you want to get involved: Wednesday, April 25, or Thursday, April 26, from 7 to 9:30 PM; or Saturday, April 28, from 10 AM to 12:30. All meetings will be held at GGNRA headquarters, Building 201 at Upper Fort Mason, in San Francisco. Enter the fort at Franklin and Bay. For more information, call the GGRO (415) 331-0730 or e-mail us at <ggro@ggnpa.org>. Visit GGRO's website at www.ggro.org.

Birdathon for Busy Backyard Birders

by Debbie Thompson

The annual Birdathon fundraiser is right around the corner on April 22 - 29. This year I am starting a flexible team named "Busy Backyard Birders" designed especially for all you busy people. This is how it will work:

Before the Birdathon day, collect pledges of either a specified amount for each species seen or a flat rate for the effort. (Flat rates tend to be easier since you can collect the money ahead of time.) Pick a neighborhood or area that you will bird on any day during the week of April 22 - 29. Bird for as many hours as you would like while recording all the species seen. Afterwards, send your Birdathon report to me. The report should include the list of species, a list of participants (including contact information), and the approximate radius and location of the area that you canvassed. I will compile the reports into a team report. Then, send the money you collected to our McClellan Ranch Office (the address is on the back page). Make all checks out to SCVAS.

My husband, Steve, and I tried this last year and it turned out to be quite fun. We decided on a 10-mile radius from our home and birded from 8 AM to 3 PM. We looked at a map and picked several parks and areas that offered varied habitats (of course, starting in our own back yard!). At the end of the day, we were surprised to find 53 species on our list. It is very rewarding to know that there are so many species to see right in our own neighborhood! And even more rewarding to know that we (with the support of our donors) helped fund some of the important projects at SCVAS.

You do not have to sign up ahead of time. All you have to do to join the "Busy Backyard Birders" is to send your report to me within two weeks of the Birdathon! What could be easier? Feel free to contact me at (408) 227-4604 if you have any questions. Send the report to me either

via e-mail <dthompson@idt.com> or by post to the McClellan Ranch Office. I look forward to having you all as teammates!

Calendar *cont'd*

**Sunday Apr. 29, 8:00 AM

Stevens Creek County Park

Half day. Leader: TBA (Call Bob Reiling (408) 253-7527). From I-280 in Cupertino take Foothill Expwy exit south 2.1 miles (becomes Stevens Canyon Rd.), turn left into first (Chestnut) park entrance; meet in first parking lot. One of the best riparian birding spots in the South Bay for migrants and local breeding birds. \$4 entrance fee. **LO**

**Saturday May 5, 8:30 AM

Mines Rd. and vicinity

Full day. Leader: Don Schmoltdt (916) 739-8821. We'll start in Del Puerto Canyon, working our way west to San Antonio Valley and ending up in Livermore. From I-580 go east over Altamont Pass to I-5, then south on I-5 to the Patterson exit. Go west on Del Puerto Canyon Rd., meet at first pullout (look for Don's "BAJA OWL" license plate). Highlights: possible Costa's Hummingbird, Phainopepla, Lewis's Woodpecker and Lawrence's Goldfinch.

**Sunday May 6, 8:30 AM

Carmel River

Half day plus. Leader: Bill Hill (Call Bob Reiling (408) 253-7527). We will bird a new area south of Carmel River, some of the north bank, the Lagoon (formed at the mouth of the river) and the beach. Time permitting we will "chase" rarities found during the previous week-ends' Birdathon. Take Hwy. 1 south to Rio Rd. in Carmel; turn left then immedi-

BIRDATHON TEAMS

Almaden Eagles—

Ann Verdi, John Mariani
(408) 266-5108

Busy Backyard Birders—

Debbie and Steve Thompson
(408) 227-4604

Hacienda Harried Hawks—

Elaine Gould & Hacienda friends
(408) 448-0622

Hummdingers—

Sandy Cortright and friends
(408) 738-1251

Portola Valley Birders—

Craig Breon and PV friends
(408) 252-3748

Rock Wrens—

Leda Beth Gray, David Drake, Ulrike Keyssner (831) 336-1127

Spider Hunters—

Vivek Tawari and friends
(650) 522-8975

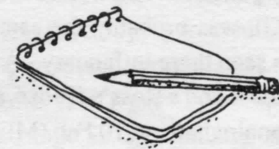
Vagrants—

Grant Hoyt & friends (650) 969-7892

Wrong Terns—

Bobbie Handen, Allen Royer & friends
(408) 356-4263

Form your own team and join us!



ately right into Crossroads Shopping Center. Meet in Cinema parking lot at back of mall near river. Bring a lunch and your enthusiasm.

**Wednesday May 9, 8:30 AM

Gilroy Hot Springs

Half day. Leader: Bob Reiling (408) 253-7527. Meet at intersection of Gilroy Hot Springs Rd. and Canada Rd. From Hwy 101 in Gilroy go left on Leavesley Rd., left on New Ave, then right on Roop Rd. Once in foothills bear left at first fork in road and continue several miles to Canada Rd. Highlights: migrants, breeding birds. **LO**

Field Notes

by Bill Bousman

Loons through Waterfowl

An immature **Red-throated Loon** was found at Calero Reservoir on 22 Feb (JMa) and was seen again on 24 Feb (MJM, MMR). Two days later, loon magic provided an immature **Pacific Loon** on the same reservoir on 26 Feb (FV). January's lingering pelicans barely eased into February with two **American White Pelicans** in the Palo Alto Flood Control Basin (FCB) on 2 Feb (WGB), a single bird on the Parkway Lakes on 11 Feb (WGB), and a very unseasonal immature **Brown Pelican** at the Palo Alto Baylands on 4 Feb (JMa et al.). The immature **Greater White-fronted Goose**, associating with the Canada Geese at Byxbee and Shoreline parks, was seen through 6 Feb (v.ob.). A single bird was seen over the Los Gatos Creek percolation ponds on 10 Feb (LCh et al.). An immature **Snow Goose**, in with the domestic geese at the Sunnyvale Water Pollution Control Plant (WPCP) ponds on 4 Feb (MJM) and 23 Feb (AG), was probably the same bird that was seen there in January. Another Snow Goose and a **Ross's Goose**, seen at Lake Cunningham on 10 Feb (ME, HC), were likely the same birds found there earlier this winter. The flock of wintering **Wood Ducks** at Almaden Reservoir remained intact in February and a remarkable 118 were counted on 10 Feb (LCh et al.). **Eurasian Wigeon** have been scarce this month with the only record being of a bird in outer Charleston Slough on 5 Feb (RC) that was first found in late January. **Blue-winged Teal** seen this month have all been from the Palo Alto FCB with three there on 3 Feb (SEM), seven on 10 Feb (LCh et al.) and a pair on 27 Feb (MMR). The 'Eurasian' **Green-winged Teal** found last month on the outer side of the Palo Alto FCB was seen again on 3 Feb (SEM). A likely hybrid male **Tufted Duck x Greater Scaup** was

well described from Shoreline Park on 10 Feb (AME), but this interesting hybrid was not seen subsequently. Shoreline Lake has been bereft of **Barrow's Goldeneyes** in February, but the female found earlier in the winter at Calero Reservoir was seen there again on 25 Feb (AME). The ample numbers of **Hooded Mergansers** have dropped in February with the best counts being two pairs at Los Gatos Creek CP on 23 Feb (LS) and four females in a small channel near the Mountain View Forebay on 26 Feb (WGB). High counts of **Common Mergansers**

*Rare winter raptors
included a
Rough-legged Hawk,
and two Long-eared Owls
at a winter roost*

include 20 on Grant Lake on 17 Feb (MDo et al.), 18 on Uvas Reservoir on 25 Feb (AME), and 14 on Calero Reservoir on 24 Feb (MJM).

Raptors through Gulls

An immature **Bald Eagle** seen along Coyote Creek near Dixon Landing Road on 6 Feb (RD) was thought to be a 3rd-winter bird. An adult **Ferruginous Hawk** was found east of Cochrane and Highway 101 on 14 Feb (TRy, JC) for the first report this year. Much less common, a 1st-year **Rough-legged Hawk** was found along Bloomfield Avenue south of Gilroy on 25 Feb (AME) and was seen again on 27 Feb (MJM, MiF). The high tides in February brought out at least one **Black Rail** at the Palo Alto Baylands on 8 Feb (MJM, MMR). A **Snowy Plover** was seen in Alviso on 25 Feb (FV). This is their last stronghold in the county, if this is an appropriate term for a species not

even recorded in the past year. The Lake Cunningham **Lesser Black-backed Gull** has been reported only once in February, on 10 Feb (ME, HC). The 1st-winter **Glaucous Gull** found last month at the Palo Alto Duck Pond was seen there at least through 10 Feb (m.ob.). Photos (MMR) have been distributed widely on the internet and there is general agreement that this bird is dark for a pure Glaucous, with a number of votes for a Glaucous x Herring Gull—life is interesting. An immature at the Alviso EEC on 11 Feb (MW) appears to be more in the typical range and a 2nd-year bird at Almaden Lake 15-19 Feb (AME, JDa) was well described.

Owls through Sparrows

Of all winter treats, few match finding a roost of one of our rarer owls. A single **Long-eared Owl** was found at Ed Levin CP on 4 Feb (KP, LP *vide* LCh) and two were seen there on 6 Feb (LP, LCh). At least one of these birds was seen, with difficulty, through 11 Feb (v.ob.).

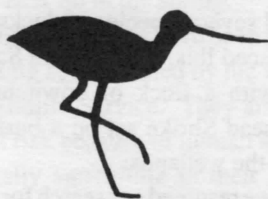
At least one of the Palo Alto FCB **Short-eared Owls** was seen in February with observations on 2 Feb (KDeM) and 4 Feb (MJM). A **Costa's Hummingbird** was heard along Los Alamitos Creek near Camden on 15 Feb (JDa). This hummingbird is very rare in central California and normally shows a pattern of post-breeding dispersal from May to November. We have only one previous winter record for the county. As in the past, Ed Levin CP was the center of unusual sapsucker activity. A hybrid sapsucker, showing mostly Red-naped characters, was found on 4 Feb (KP, LP *vide* LCh), but clearly showed characteristics of a Red-breasted Sapsucker. This bird was seen at least through 8 Feb (v.ob.). A second bird, found on 24 Feb (ND), may have been either Red-naped or Yellow-bellied. The identification of wintering sapsuckers remains a difficult problem.

continued next page

Field Notes *cont'd*

An **American Dipper** was found along Uvas Creek near Swanson Creek on 24 Feb (MJM), an area where they have historically nested. A single **Golden-crowned Kinglet** seen in Palo Alto Foothills Park on 28 Feb (PMB et al.) was the only one found in February. Wintering **Orange-crowned Warblers** were found in a number of places. Two were near the Sunnyvale WPCP on 4 Feb (MJM), one was along Stevens Creek above Crittenden Lane on 13 Feb (MMR), and one was near California and Mathilda in Sunnyvale on 17 Feb (CIW). The **White-throated Sparrow** wintering along Alamitos Road beside Almaden Reservoir was seen regularly during the month (v.ob.). A bird at a Los Gatos feeder was also regular in February (JD).

Observers: Bill Bousman (WGB), Phyllis Browning (PMB), Richard Carlson (RC), Joanna Cezniak (JC), Les Chibana (LCh), Hugh Cotter (HC), Robin Dakin (RD), Jim Danzenbaker (JDa), Natasha Dehn (ND), Karen DeMello (KDeM), Matthew Dodder (MDo), Jean Dubois (JD), Mark Eaton (ME), Al Eisner (AME), Mike Feighner (MiF), Andy Gibb (AG), Mike Mammoser (MJM), John Mariani (JMa), Steve Miller (SEM), Kay Partelow (KP), Lisa Pavey (LP), Mike Rogers (MMR), Tom Ryan (TRy), Linda Sullivan (LS), Frank Vanslager (FV), Michael Wienholt (MW), and Claire Wolfe (CIW).



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

Trip Reports

New Field Seminar Series a Hit

by Steve Rutledge

I recently led a series of instructional birding trips for SCVAS, and I would like to share my experiences with *Avocet* readers. The field seminar approach was very well received, with many birders expressing interest in learning more about the biology of common birds. It was gratifying to receive many compliments about the trips.

The general idea was to take time to look closely at each species we found, discussing the field identification in depth (with special emphasis on separating males from females and differentiating the species being examined from closely related species). We also explored the basic biology of many birds, looking especially at the features unique to a particular family of birds. We discussed topics ranging from taxonomy to feeding ecology to migration patterns. On each trip I prepared handouts that explored topics dealing with specific groups of birds. At the end of each trip, we filled out checklists of the birds we saw.

The first two trips had too many people, but I was very grateful that Frank Vanslager attended both trips. He was willing to share his knowledge and his Questar telescope, and he made it possible for people to see more birds. Still, I felt that there were too many participants for the kind of trip I wanted to do, so for the third trip, to Arastradero Preserve and Foothills Park in February, I requested that 15 birders sign up for an overflow trip. These February trips were attended by fewer than 10 people but were quite successful despite rainy weather.

On the first trip, to Charleston Slough, we focused on waterfowl. We got to see representatives of several tribes of ducks, including the dabblers (Gadwall and Green-winged Teal), the inland divers (Canvasback and Greater Scaup), and sea ducks (Common Goldeneye and Bufflehead). Various ducks we encountered provided good lessons on a variety of

ecological and morphological adaptations. Northern Shovelers illustrated the foraging technique of dabblers, filtering mud for small particles of food. We used the Mallard to review a typical duck's year, discussing the cycle of fall migration, winter courtship, spring migration, mating, rearing young, and molting into eclipse plumage. The Ruddy Duck, a bird so evolutionarily removed from other waterfowl that it has recently been placed in its own subfamily, was also present.

Our second trip, also to Charleston Slough, was dedicated to waterbirds other than ducks and geese. We concentrated on herons, shorebirds, grebes and gulls. The roosting flock of Black-crowned Night Herons provided an opportunity to discuss special adaptations of this family. We considered, for instance, the production of powder down and the comb-like structure on the middle toe: both are adaptations that aid in cleaning fish slime from feathers.

The Snowy Egret demonstrated one of its hunting specializations: shaking its yellow feet in the water to lure fish (or possibly to scare prey from hiding). Least Sandpipers (at 21 grams) and Long-billed Curlews (587 grams) exemplified the huge range in size among shorebirds. Eared and Horned Grebes were both present at Shoreline Lake, allowing a detailed comparison of the field marks that separate these birds in winter plumage. We discussed why it might be that grebes eat their own feathers. A special treat was the Red-throated Loon, located by Frank Vanslager.

On the weekend of February 10 and 11, I conducted field trips to Arastradero Preserve and Foothills Park in Palo Alto. Both trips featured dramatic weather, with periods of heavy showers (and even a little hail!) interspersed with intense sunshine and beautiful colors. The group saw White-tailed Kites cavorting in the

continued on page 9

In Search of the Elusive Mountain Plover

by Leda Beth Gray

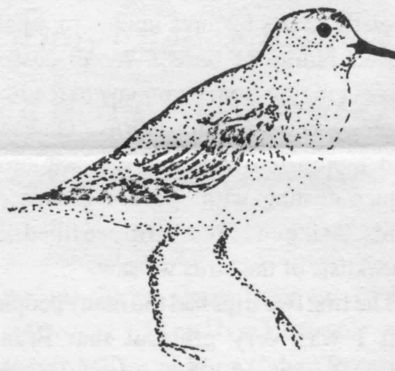
A friend of ours has been talking about his “nemesis bird”, the Mountain Plover, for the six or so years my husband Dave and I have known him. He is a top-notch birder, and although his career limits the amount of time he has for birding, I still figured that this bird must be really hard to find, or else you just had to be plain lucky.

A couple years ago in January, he invited us to go on a birding trip to Panoche Valley, where Mountain Plovers had been seen. The trip was great fun with a lot of good birds, but we found no Mountain Plovers even though we had directions to a spot where they had been seen within the previous few days. Since then I've been on the lookout for them too, when I am in likely areas in the Central Valley, but haven't had any luck either. They show up from time to time in Panoche Valley but the reports of sightings seem to be getting sparse.

Last fall at an SCVAS general meeting talk on the Salton Sea given by David Shuford of PRBO, we learned that Mountain Plovers winter in the agricultural fields surrounding the Salton Sea, in California's Imperial Valley down near the Mexican border. He noted that these plovers could often be seen following plows, eating prey that was being unearthed. That didn't sound too hard. We decided we would try for Mountain Plover at the end of this past January even though our friend was too busy with a new job to join us.

When we arrived at the Refuge we headed straight for the headquarters, near the town of Calipatria. As we drove past the agricultural fields we saw hundreds of Cattle Egrets dotting the mostly fallow fields. Long-billed Curlews were also numerous. We stopped in a few locations along rural roads and saw Great-tailed Grackle, Say's Phoebe, Northern Harrier, Horned Lark and Western Meadowlark, among others.

Unlike many birds, the Mountain Plover is not consistently found at the same location over and over, according to a staff person at Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge who was transmitting the information from researchers currently censusing Mountain Plovers in the area. After talking to the staff person at the headquarters, who also told us to look in recently plowed or burned out fields, or in fields of small alfalfa plants, we decided to bird around the headquarters for a bit first.



*Sketch of a Mountain Plover
Bonnie Bedford-White*

I recalled having to work to find Abert's Towhees one spring when I was here, as I watched two of them hopping around in the bushes next to the parking lot. This time, we easily found several in the area around the headquarters. Almost immediately we ran into a group of birders on an organized tour, who were nice enough to point out a Black and White Warbler and give us more pointers on finding the Mountain Plover. They had seen a flock of 40 or so that morning in a burned out field not too far away on English Road. No one had any advice for the time of day that would be best, a couple folks claiming they had seen

Mountain Plovers at various times of the day. We lingered with the group as they spotted a Greater Roadrunner and a Verdin, also seeing Blue-gray Gnatcatchers along with White-crowned Sparrows and others, but soon we took off in search of the elusive plover.

As one might expect, it wasn't easy. We found the burned out field on English Road, but there were no Mountain Plovers—only a couple of curlews. Extensive searches along English and other nearby roads turned up several plowing operations with hundreds of birds trailing behind them—Ring-billed gulls, Cattle Egrets, Long-billed Curlews—but no Mountain Plovers. We were pleased to find several Mountain Bluebirds hawking insects over the fields, along with the “usual suspects,” including an American Kestrel about every mile or so. After a few hours of plow-chasing and straining our eyes, we went off to Anza Borrego State Park to camp for the night.

The next morning, after enjoying views of Costa's Hummingbird and Black-tailed Gnatcatcher at our campsite, we headed for Vendel Road, which leads into the Refuge's Unit 1 off Highway 78. Although keeping our eyes open for burned out and bare fields, we had a fun time finding all sorts of other birds. A Ferruginous Hawk stood on the ground in one field. Snow and Ross's Geese were in flocks at much closer range than we usually get to see them in the Central Valley. Wetland areas at the edge of the lake had several species of ducks, a few White-faced Ibis, and two Stilt Sandpipers in with a flock of dowitchers. A Loggerhead Shrike sat on a bush overlooking the wetlands.

Later we resumed our search for Mountain Plover, looking along the various farm roads that criss-cross the area at the south end of the Sea. We spotted Burrowing Owls glaring at us from next to burrows along agricultural ditches, and

continued next page

Mountain Plover *cont'd*

in a few places from artificial burrows that were set up for them by the refuge, complete with signs identifying the burrows as belonging to them.

After a few more hours of staring into barren fields we decided to try the English Road area again. We scanned fields with our binocs and spotting scope in a number of places until we got back to the original burned out field. We gave it a really good going over for one last time, and Dave thought he saw something on the far end. When he got the scope on it he could see that it was a Mountain Plover! (High five!) It only had one friend that we could see, but we continued searching as the two plovers worked the field, and came up with 3 others. A couple of the birds worked their way closer to us so we ended up getting a fairly decent look. So there it was. Not a huge flock, just five—but it was definitely them.

It wasn't a typical sort of birding trip at all. There were a lot of very strong fertilizer smells and staring at barren fields, so I was glad that this search was interspersed with birdwatching at wetlands, desert, and the Sea itself, which had many American White Pelicans and Eared Grebes near the shores. A dead tree standing in water at the edge of the lake at sunset, beautifully decorated with Cattle Egrets, made a big impression on me. I hope to get back there to do some more birding in the various wetland areas around the Sea to see some of birds that arrive later on in the spring.

Mountain Plovers have been proposed for listing as threatened by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. They are considered at risk because of human activities, especially agriculture in their breeding areas. Once widespread throughout the Americas, the U.S. population now breeds and winters in limited areas of the west. Ninety percent of them winter in the Imperial and Central Valleys of California. They are currently being studied by researchers who want to better under-

Field Seminars

sky, a mated pair of Red-shouldered Hawks perched in a tree, and an American Kestrel in full sun perched against a backdrop of dark storm clouds. All these birds helped illustrate our discussion of the taxonomy and feeding ecology of raptors.

The Foothills Park Interpretive Center provided a welcome respite from the rain. A collection of bird specimens in two display cases provided props for an impromptu lecture on the field identification and biology of the species represented. The Red-breasted Sapsucker specimen, for example, served to illustrate the unusual toe placement of woodpeckers, as well as their stiff central rectrices. This led to a discussion of other features of woodpeckers, including their long and unusual tongues and their reinforced skulls. We used a hand-out on woodpeckers to illustrate how learning birds by genus and family helps our appreciation and understanding of birds in the field. Other highlights included Western Bluebirds flycatching over Boronda Lake, a Hermit Thrush doing its patented wing flicks and tail motions, and an Anna's Hummingbird engaged in its dramatic courtship flight, complete with the sharp note produced by its tail feathers.

The trip to Windy Hill surprised me with good weather in spite of the forecast



stand environmental threats to these birds, which may include pesticides applied to the fields where they winter.

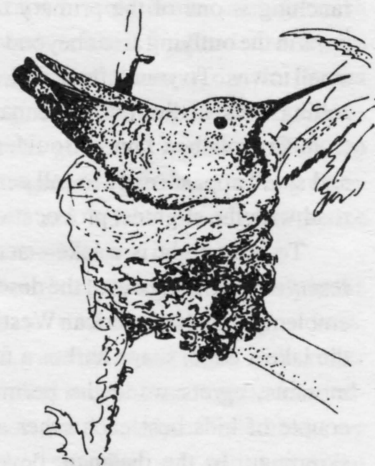
Audubon is already working on issues related to the toxicity and high salt content of the Salton Sea. Once the Mountain Plover is better understood I hope there will be a way for Audubon and others to work with farmers around the Salton Sea to make sure these birds are safe on their wintering grounds. Besides—I want our friend to find his nemesis bird!

cont'd

for showers. We had a full turnout of those who had signed up. The trip began with a brief discussion on the critical importance of bird conservation. The handout for the day presented lists of American birds in trouble—not only endangered and threatened birds, but also those species on the Watchlist put out by the American Bird Conservancy. The handout also gave brief descriptions of about ten non-profit groups involved in bird conservation.

Our highlights for the day included a roosting Great Horned Owl, an Anna's Hummingbird building a nest, Red-winged Blackbirds establishing territories, singing California Thrashers, and a flock of Pine Siskins giving their diagnostic "zzrreeee" call. For the three birders who stayed for lunch, there was a special treat: good looks at one of two tan-stripe morph White-throated Sparrows that had been wintering in the vicinity. This was a life bird for all three participants!

More trip reports on on page 11

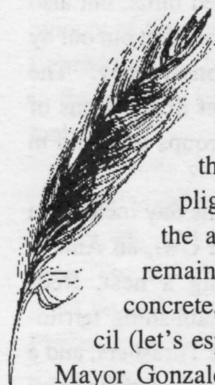


*"Our highlights for the day included an Anna's Hummingbird building a nest..."
sketch by Bonnie Bedford-White*

Time For a Change of Pace

Kern River Stirs Personal Reflections

by Craig Breon
Executive Director



For a page, let's forget the earnest conservation work of Silicon Valley. Forget the freeways, Cisco, the plight of Burrowing Owls, the attempts to hem in our remaining riparian areas with concrete, the San Jose City Council (let's especially agree to forget Mayor Gonzales), Palm Pilots (AKA pocket nags), and cell phone users chattering in crowded restaurants.

Instead, let me paint you a picture. Don't read this hurriedly, while standing at the kitchen counter. Find a comfortable seat, and by all means turn the cell phone off.

The landscape comes from the Southern Sierras as they dip into the Great Central Valley—lower elevations, transitions from one habitat to another all around. You're driving a two-lane road with long vistas. The road sees just a few cars at a time, mainly ranch pick-ups, as ranching is one of the primary occupations in the outlying areas beyond the few small towns. To your left are arid, steeply rolling hills of the burnt sienna colors from Crayola box fame. Boulders large and small appear ready to roll across the road with the slightest provocation.

To your right is a lake—actually a reservoir—coming out of the desert hills, emblematic of the American West. Along the lake's edge, snags harbor a few cormorants; egrets wade the perimeter; a couple of kids best each other at stone skipping. In the distance, beyond the water's surface, mountains rise. Surprisingly, those mountains are not so much desert as pine covered, much like we've come to expect from the Sierras.

The road takes long, sweeping turns, rising and falling over small ridges. These kinds of roads are a pleasure to drive, allowing for comfortable speeds and providing a sense of the unconstrained, much like the land around it.

About fifteen minutes out of the main town in this region, your car tops yet another of these pleasant ridges, looking forward to more of the same. However, if your car could see what you do, it might just stop short. Stretching out before you, at the upper end of the reservoir, are hundreds of acres of lush, bright green vegetation. The new, chlorophyll green of spring. The contrast—sienna to green—startles the mind as much as it brightens the eye. A willow and cottonwood oasis in an otherwise harsh realm. In other words, bird mecca.

Willows and cottonwoods of such a span as to bring only envious, distant memories of the rest of California's Central Valley rivers. They, too, had this riparian forest once, but were stripped long ago for farm fields or irrigation and flood control projects. Now, only the South Fork of the Kern River contains such wealth. It's spring, the perfect time of year for allowing new, leafy life to remind you of history.

Descending to the valley floor, you can't be blamed for stopping at the first pull-out available and just wandering; wandering and listening to the myriad trills and chirps and songs. Summer Tanager, Blue Grosbeak, Lawrence's Goldfinch, Willow Flycatcher—they're all here.

Drive another five minutes and you reach Audubon-California's Kern River Preserve. It's 1127 acres of birding bliss, and each year hosts the Kern River Bioregions Festival, to be held this year from April 27-29. The scene I painted above is just what I experienced last year, when I first attended the festival. I had a blast. I want you to go.

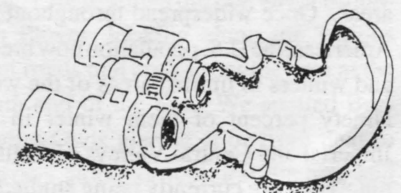
Did I mention Miracle Hot Springs? Picture hot, hot, hot water cascading from tub to tub (the tubs seem natural but were built into a rock face) until it spills out of the last tub into the Kern River as it flows below Lake Isabella. I went just before nightfall, and the combination of hot, sulfurous water alongside a cold, pulsing river was heavenly. Owls prowl the surrounding air, and you can hear fish jump.

I camped along the North Fork of the Kern, above the town of Kernville. Great campsites, well kept up, sparsely inhabited this time of year. I highly recommend skinny-dipping in the snowmelt waters, just to see how big your goosebumps can get. There are hotel accommodations as well, though with fewer skinny-dipping opportunities.

Make sure to check out Astronomy Night. Folks from near and far bring scopes—big ones—and there's a great slide show to boot. Cal-Audubon makes the birding easy, often providing a van and expert guide.

There's not enough room on my page to cover the full event, so try
H Y P E R L I N K h t t p : / /
frontpage.lightspeed.net/KRP/
bioregion.htm or
http://frontpage.lightspeed.net/KRP/
bioregion.htm for details.

PS—My traveling companion last year to Kern River was Denice. She and I shared a passionate, tumultuous relationship, which has since ended. Our trip to the Kern was one of the highlights of our world of highs and lows. Thanks Denice. I love you.



Trip reports

San Mateo Co. Coast February 18

With heavy clouds hanging over much of the Peninsula and South Bay on Sunday, Feb. 18, only six birders turned out for a field trip to coastal San Mateo County. But the forecast was correct: it was dry for our entire four hours of birding, and the sun even came out for some of it. We spent much of the time at and near the north end of Pillar Point Harbor; three of the group had to leave before a brief stop at the south end of the harbor and a visit to Frenchman's Creek near Half Moon Bay.

Our best bird was, in fact, at the south end of the harbor (just north of the boat launch). An Oldsquaw (sorry, a female Long-Tailed Duck) had been found there by Al Jaramillo close to the road about two weeks earlier; it continued for several days, but had not been seen since. While scoping the most distant channel with his Questar, Frank Vanslager came upon what was presumably the same bird. Our views weren't very satisfying, but they were enough to tell what it was. Much more cooperative was a Brant in fresh-looking plumage, right by the shore. We saw nothing else unusual in the harbor, but had good looks of at least half dozen Common Loons (one well en-route to breeding plumage), one Red-Throated Loon, five Cinnamon Teal (at the marsh), a Red-Shouldered Hawk (interacting with a Red-Tailed), a Black Oystercatcher, and a nice assortment of other waterbirds and shorebirds.

At Frenchman's Creek (east of Highway 1), we didn't find any unusual warblers, but did find an adult Sharp-Shinned Hawk, a flock of Band-Tailed Pigeons (not typical of this location), several Pygmy Nuthatches, at least four Townsend's Warblers, and sixty or more Pine Siskins, which seemed ubiquitous. All in all, we had a most enjoyable morning, and I thank all who came out and helped to make the trip a success.

—Al Eisner

Ogier Ponds March 18

Thousands of fans showed up to watch a tournament (and clog Highway 101) at Coyote Creek Golf Course on Sunday, March 18. For 13 birders, however, the real action took place a couple miles upstream at the SCVAS birding field trip to Ogier Ponds in Morgan Hill.

An early morning fog suppressed visibility and bird activity for 45 minutes, but once it lifted we had plenty of birds to see. Ducks and waterfowl were not numerous, but we had good looks at Bufflehead, Greater and Lesser Scaup, one female Common Goldeneye, and a pair of Common Mergansers, among others. A Spotted Sandpiper perched cooperatively on a small rock, bobbing and teetering before being displaced by an aggressive Coot. An American Bittern exploded from a reedy patch, displaying its diagnostic wing pattern for a brief but satisfying look.

Raptors took their time getting active, thanks to the fog, but by mid-morning the sky was alive with birds of prey. Frank Vanslager and Karen Hoyt teamed up to spot and identify a distant dark blob perched on a power tower—a Peregrine Falcon, which showed up surprisingly well in Frank's Questar telescope at 100x magnification. A few minutes later the bird shot over our heads for a closer view before disappearing to the southeast. Tom Murray picked out a beautiful male Osprey soaring lazily over the ponds, and our first Red-tailed Hawks were a courting pair that featured a handsome dark-morph male. White-tailed Kites foraged nearby, dodging the model airplanes over their shared air space at the south end of the ponds, and Red-shouldered Hawks called from the riparian habitat nearby.

Few migrant passerines were observed, but the Tree Swallows occupying a path-side sycamore tree gave us gorgeous looks at their iridescent blue heads and backs, while Nuttall's Woodpeckers probed the



Thanks to Frank Vanslager and his Questar telescope, we could identify a distant dark blob perched on a power tower—a Peregrine Falcon. Sketch by Emélie Curtis

same tree for nest cavities. Local breeders, including California Thrasher, Oak Titmouse, Common Yellowthroat and House Finch poured out their spring melodies, while Marsh Wrens, Song Sparrows and Tricolored Blackbirds chattered, babbled and buzzed in the marshy reeds.

An "Audubon Moment" photo opportunity came and went since no one had a camera, but the striking image remained: A male Anna's Hummingbird, its purplered gorget blazing for all to see, was joined by an American Goldfinch just beginning to molt into breeding plumage, a mixture of soft brown and greenish yellow with a black forehead. Our scopes captured the diminutive duo in perfect lighting, the hummer perched six inches above the goldfinch against a backdrop of fresh green vegetation, eliciting many "ooohs" and "aaahs" from both novice and veteran birders in our group.

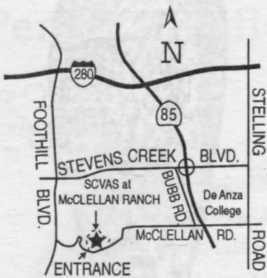
Although we were just a bit early in the season to find any of the flycatchers, vireos, warblers, orioles and other neotropical migrants soon to be descending upon our local riparian habitats, we nevertheless had a lively outing at one of the South County's most reliable birding sites.

—Grant Hoyt

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2001 Volume 48, Number 4

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