

Sierra Squawker



PUBLIC PROGRAM - JANUARY 21

The Audubon California Tri-colored Blackbird Project

Presented by Lowell Young

The program that I will be presenting is about the genesis of the Audubon California Tricolored Blackbird Team. It began about 11 years ago, when I took on the responsibility for doing tricolored blackbird surveys in Merced County. Four years ago, my team and I finally found the first colony of tricoloreds we had ever seen in the survey area during the survey period. There were at least 60,000 of them and I will never forget the thrill of seeing so many birds at one time. During this period of time, I personally observed more tricolored blackbirds, though fewer in total numbers, in the foothills of the Sierra and grasslands adjacent to them than I had ever seen in the Central Valley. What happened to that colony of birds and several other events that I experienced during that period of time got my dander up. The rest is history and the subject of my presentation.



Tri-colored Blackbird - John Turner

The Tricolored Blackbird resides almost exclusively in California, and in the 19th Century, flocks were described as so numerous “as to darken the sky.” Since then, the population has declined from several million to slightly less than 300,000 today. Over just the last 70 years, the Tricolored Blackbird population has decreased by more than 80%.

Lowell was born and raised in Salt Lake City, Utah. After graduating from high school, he attended Westminster College and the University of Utah. In 1955 he moved to California to continue education at Fullerton and San Jose State Colleges. In 1976, Lowell and family moved to Tuolumne County where they lived until moving to Mariposa County in 1986.

Join us at 7 PM, **January 21st** in the Tuolumne County Library on Greenley Road in Sonora to enjoy Lowell’s presentation. The public is always welcome at our monthly programs and refreshments are served after the program. Products and publications on a wide range of birding topics are on display and on sale at each meeting. For further information, please call **David Harden** at (209)533-1668 or email dharden@sonnet.com.

Upcoming 2015 Public Programs

February 18: Steven Umland, Africa Tour, Part II

May 20: Tom Hahn, Red Crossbills

March 18: Karen Amstutz, Nepal

June 17: Annual meeting & potluck

April 15: John Harris, Sierra Mammals

**TRICOLORED BLACKBIRD EMERGENCY LISTING
DECEMBER 3, 2014**

Responding to an alarming drop in the rare bird's numbers, the California Fish and Game Commission today approved an emergency listing of the Tricolored Blackbird under the California Endangered Species Act. Representatives of Audubon California say they support the action by the Commission, which comes on the heels of a statewide survey completed this summer showing a 44 percent decline in Tricolored Blackbirds since 2011.

The Tricolored Blackbird, which once numbered in the millions, lives almost entirely in California, and has long been of concern to conservationists. The loss of 90 percent of its historic habitat is likely the main cause of its decline. A recent survey conducted by UC Davis with the support of Audubon California and the California Dept. of Fish & Wildlife counted 145,000 Tricolored Blackbirds remaining in California, down from 260,000 in 2011.

The Fish and Game Commission made the right decision today "said Brigid McCormack, executive director of Audubon California. *"While we are pleased that this struggling species is getting the protections it needs, we understand that this is just the beginning of its path to recovery. We are committed to working closely with our partners at government agencies like the Department of Fish and Wildlife and the Natural Resource Conservation Service, as well as agricultural groups like Western United Dairymen, to save this iconic species from extinction."*

In recent years, Audubon California has supported efforts by the Natural Resources Conservation Service to create agreements with dairy farmers to delay harvests to allow the young birds to fledge. These agreements with farmers have saved many thousands of Tricolored Blackbirds. In one notable instance earlier this year, Audubon California rallied thousands of supporters to save a colony of more than 20,000 birds that were at risk of being destroyed on a farm in Madera County.

Because of the loss of their traditional wetland habitat, Tricolored Blackbirds often create their huge colonies on dairy farm wheat fields. This puts them at risk when the farmer needs to harvest the field before the young birds have fledged.

According to the California Endangered Species Act, the Commission may list a species when there is an imminent danger. Once listing is approved, the bird will be protected for six months, after which time the listing may be renewed for another six months. The Commission will likely consider a formal listing petition sometime in the spring.

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RECENT BIRD SIGHTINGS

Nov 16

On Sunday afternoon there were at least two Western Bluebirds flitting on the Pinecrest Lakebed back and forth between stumps, rocks, and ground. I've seen Mountain Bluebirds passing through from time to time, but don't recall seeing Westerns. Should I be surprised to see them at Pinecrest's elevation?

Ellen Reintjes, Pinecrest

Dec 1

This morning there were at least 7 Varied Thrushes feeding in our yard just above Calaveras Big Trees State Park.

Chris Bard, Dorrington. Elevation 4,000 ft.

Dec 2

In the midst of wind and rain today there appeared a male Calliope Hummingbird at my feeder, and it actually chased a couple of Anna's Hummingbirds away. First sighting at this location.

Tom Harrington, Sonora. Elevation 2300ft.

Dec 4 - 7

Cooper's Hawk attempted to take a Mountain Chickadee from the feeder on my front porch in Arnold but the chickadee evaded capture, whereupon the Cooper's perched about 30 ft. from where I was sitting, apparently taking time to consider the situation for a few minutes before flying away.

Then, at my bird bath, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Varied Thrush, Ruby and Golden-crowned Kinglets, Pacific Wren, Hermit Thrush, Spotted Towhee, Brown Creeper, Junco, Steller's Jay, Mountain & Chestnut-backed Chickadees, Anna's Hummingbird, Purple Finch and Northern Flicker.

John Sutake, Arnold. Elevation 4,000 ft.

Dec 14

Merlin aggressively flew at a Sharp-shinned Hawk sitting in a tree in my yard and chased it away for several seconds. The aggressive action of the Merlin towards the Sharpie ("Hey, get out of my area!") was quite amusing.

Spotted Towhees - 17 which is a rather high number at one time although we do see a few here every year. Also, rather earlier than usual this year.

John Turner, La Grange

Dec 15

Rainy drive on Hwy 108/120 to Modesto resulted in few birds but interesting species. At the South Lake Tulloch junction there are two ponds. East pond: Raven, Grackle, & Savannah Sparrow. West pond: pair of Common Golden-eye-m/f, Gadwall, and Killdeer.

Ferruginous Hawk near Knights Ferry junction, California Gulls at Carl's Jr in Oakdale and various locations in Modesto. During drive home in steady rain we had numerous sightings of Red Tailed Hawks perched on poles--too wet to fly? First-of-Season Pine Siskin at home on our thistle feeders this morning.

Ken Smith, Chinese Camp.

December 18

Fruit on persimmon tree in Murphys main street being enjoyed by flock of Cedar Waxwings alongside Golden-crowned Sparrows, a Starling, Yellow-rumped Warblers and a Hairy Woodpecker.

Barry Boulton

December 21

Adult along with a bedraggled-looking juvenile Bald Eagle observed in the Stanislaus Middle Fork down Camp 9 road near Vallecito. With very low water levels, no sign of salmon or trout to feed the eagles. Also saw a suspected Golden Eagle which was too far away to be sure, but shape suggested Golden.

Barry Boulton

December 31

Apair - male and female - Barrow's Goldeneye on the pond at Utica power station along highway 4 just above Murphys. Also 6 female Buffleheads.

At my house in Arnold, 2 Varied Thrushes and 2 Spotted Towhees. Interestingly, I've noticed here that these two species seem to cohabit at this time of year. Has anybody else noticed their close social relationship?

John Sutake, Arnold

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CSAS FIELD TRIPS

January 7 & February 4 GCSB Walks

The first Wednesday of the month Bird Walk at the Groveland Community Services property at 18966 Ferretti Road, Groveland, is led by Jeanne Ridgley. The property encompasses an area of more than 200 acres of oak, pine and willow habitat with three water storage ponds. 139 species of birds have been seen there since November of 2007. Ring-necked Ducks have returned for the winter. Other wintering waterfowl may be seen in the next few weeks.

Meeet the group in the GCSB parking lot at 8:00 AM. Bring binoculars and a birding field guide if you have one. Rain will cancel the trip. The walk will last two-three hours. If you have any questions, call **Jeanne at 962-7598**.

SAN JOAQUIN AUDUBON FIELD TRIPS

Saturday, January 10—Cosumnes River Preserve

Join leader Jim Rowoth (487-3489 or rowoth@sbcglobal.net) for the monthly River Walk bird count through the varied habitats of the CRP. Meet Jim at the visitor center on Franklin Rd. Check website **www.cosumnes.org** for last minute updates. Double check with Jim for start time.

Sunday, January 11—Colusa & Sacramento NWR

Join leader Dave Wagner (988-6898) for a visit to these premier Sacramento Valley wildlife refuges. Meet at 8 am. in the parking lot at Toot Sweets (northwest corner of March Ln. and Quail Lakes Dr.) for carpooling. Expect to see a wide variety of wintering ducks, geese, and other waterfowl. The Falcated Duck may again be viewable. Bring a lunch.

Saturday, January 17— Woodbridge Wilderness Area

Join leader Liz West for our monthly census of this small riparian park on the banks of the Mokelumne River. Meet at the north end of Meadowlark Lane in Woodbridge at 8 am.

Sunday, January 18—Mokelumne River Fish Hatchery

Join leaders Liz West and Joanne Katanic for our monthly census of this lovely little riparian area below Comanche Dam. Meet in the fish hatchery parking lot at 8 am.

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STANISLAUS AUDUBON FIELD TRIPS

January 10. Merced National Wildlife Refuge.

Trip leader, TBA. Contact David Froba for information, 209-521-7265, froba@comcast.net. In the winter this magnificent refuge attracts waterfowl, shore birds, and other birds in the millions. Meet at the Stanislaus County Library parking lot (1500 I Street, Modesto) at 7:15 a.m. We will return to Modesto mid afternoon.

January 25. San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge.

Near Modesto, the Refuge is huge and offers the most diverse habitats in the area, including mixed species transitional savannas, riparian forest, oak woodlands, grassland, and seasonal wetlands. Trip leader, Ralph Baker (sharks_hockey_maniac@yahoo.com) chooses the particular habitats to visit each month based on conditions and season. Meet at the Stanislaus County Library parking lot (1500 I Street, Modesto) at 7:15 a.m. We will return to Modesto mid afternoon.

February 21, San Luis National Wildlife Refuge.

Near Los Banos, this Refuge has it all, wetlands, grasslands, and forest. Trip leader, TBA. Contact David Froba for information, 209-521-7265, froba@comcast.net. Meet at the Stanislaus Library parking lot at 1500 I Street at 7:15 a.m. We'll be back mid afternoon.

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CITIZEN SCIENCE - AND YOU

Citizen Science is one of those expressions that we hear from time to time and we might wonder what it is and what it means to us as regular citizens. Well, I'm not going to define it but, rather, I'm going to invite you to join us in one such project that I think will provide you with fun and interest while advancing bird science.

Let me give you a perfect example - exactly a year ago, Snowy Owls were seen as far south as Florida, a quite remarkable event because this Arctic species normally travels south only as far as northern Canada. In this case, this so-called "irruption" was probably caused by lack of the owl's primary food, lemmings, but why so far south as Florida is a real mystery. We only know this of course because people observed owls in many places on the US East Coast and reported their sightings. Given that information, bird scientists were naturally encouraged to consider and research why it was behaving in this way. This is where citizens are practicing what we might call "citizen science" in a very informal but important manner.

How does that relate to us? Well, as we observe birds in our immediate surroundings, we will notice things that are unusual in our experience - unusual birds (in our surroundings), occasional rare migrants, a species that we usually see but didn't this year, and so on. In other words, unusual or surprising sightings. Many of these things will appear to be little more than anecdotal, but in total they advance our overall bird knowledge that in turn provides information that can assist conservation of endangered or threatened species.

For example, just in these last few weeks (as I have reported in the Squawker), local birders have seen more Varied Thrushes than in previous years, and others that Steller's Jays have been observed at lower elevations than seen before.

I would like to invite you to report such unusual sightings to me and I'll include them in the Squawker and then, at the end of the year, I will collate all of those sightings and provide you with a report.

Also, I would like to hear about generally interesting bird behavior. For instance, John Turner observed a Merlin chasing a Sharp-shinned Hawk around his garden. Similarly, John Sutake watched a Bald Eagle repeatedly dive-bombing four Coots on White Pines lake - without luck in this case, but over a period of time, the Coots were reduced to only two. Did the eagle catch the missing two? We don't know, but it's quite likely. At all events, I'd like to collect these interesting behavior stories if you will email them to me.

Barry Boulton

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SONORA CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT RESULTS

The Bird Count on December 20th was quite disappointing, most certainly due to the bad weather on the day with rain in the morning, followed by miserable overcast for the remainder of the day. Consequently, our bird total of 12,300 was a 10-year low, and our species count of 92 was close to the 10-year low of 88 species in 2010. Perhaps our greatest disappointment was the ducks where we observed no Green-winged Teal or Barrow's Goldeneyes. However, we did see White-throated Sparrows which are very rare up here. Unfortunately we added the Great-tailed Grackle to our list; this is a large and aggressive Blackbird species that is slowly moving from the southern US and Mexico into northern California.

Steven Umland - Coordinator

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Best wishes to all bird lovers for a great 2015!

Central Sierra Audubon Society - CSAS

Chapter of the National Audubon Society
P.O. Box 3047, Sonora, CA 95370

General Meetings: Third Wednesday at 7pm (except July and August), in the Tuolumne Public Library on Greenley Road, Sonora.

Board Meetings: Third Wednesday at 3pm (Sept. - May) at the Blood Bank Conference Room behind Rite Aid on Greenley Road, Sonora.

Membership of National Audubon & CSAS

If you are not already a member, we would be honored to have you join us. You can join as a full member of National Audubon Society which includes dues for CSAS membership or, alternately, you may join as a local member of CSAS in which case you will receive the monthly Squawker newsletter and be privy to all other CSAS activities.

An application form is on the front page of the CSAS website at

www.centralsierraaudubon.org

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