



## PUBLIC PROGRAM - MARCH 18

### “No Bird Brains Here: The Latest on Bird Learning, Instinct, and Intelligence”

Presented by Susan Schneider

**B**irds can learn from consequences, as we and many other species can: baby chicks learn to peck accurately, wild mockingbirds can learn to recognize individual people, and pigeons are able to learn to categorize art and music. Even instinctive behaviors like imprinting can be more flexible than scientists used to think, and songbird song appears particularly malleable.

**T**his talk will explore bird learning and intelligence, from everyday foraging, to learning through observing, to tool use. Such adaptability may be critical as wild birds attempt to adjust to the many threats they face. Scientists also take advantage of this powerful learning ability to help save endangered species.



Marsh Wren learns & creates over 200 songs.

Photo: Barry Boulton

**A**biopsychologist, Susan has over 25 years of research and teaching experience in the science of consequences and nature-nurture relations. She's also an avid birder, field trip leader, and environmental activist. A board member of San Joaquin Audubon since 2009, she was on the Tropical Audubon board in Miami, and is a past president of Mountaineer Audubon in West Virginia. Susan has published numerous scientific articles and book chapters, and has been a faculty member at St. Olaf College, Auburn University, and Florida International University. She's currently a Visiting Scholar at the University of the Pacific. Susan's first book for the public, *The Science of Consequences: How They Affect Genes, Change the Brain, and Impact our World*, is a selection of the Scientific American Book Club, and will be available for purchase at the meeting.

**J**oin us at 7 PM, March 18th in the Tuolumne County Library on Greenley Road in Sonora to enjoy Susan'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.

**F**or further information, please call **David Harden** at (209)533-1668 or email [dharden@sonnet.com](mailto:dharden@sonnet.com).

### Upcoming 2015 Public Programs

**April 15:** Christy Sherr, Black-backed Woodpeckers and Forest Fires

**May 20:** Tom Hahn, Red Crossbills

**June 17:** Annual meeting & potluck

**Jul/August:** Summer break

## WHY SO MANY VARIED THRUSHES THIS YEAR?

As noted in previous issues of the Squawker, many bird watchers in our region have reported seeing larger-than-usual numbers of Varied Thrushes and so I thought you may like to know why that occurred (my hypothesis of course!).

After breeding in the dense humid coniferous forests of the Pacific Northwest from California to Alaska, they typically migrate around mid-October south to winter mostly along California's coastal regions, often in social flocks, and often mingling with Robins which helps protect them against predators. The significant aspect of this species that helps to explain our recent observations is that it is known as an "irruptive species" which means that it has irregular migration patterns that are determined by population numbers and food availability as modified by environmental conditions. Given these variables, Varied Thrushes are seen in highly varying numbers over the years in the Sierra (by the way, that is not the origin of "Varied" in its name which is because of its dappled plumage).



Photo courtesy of Gary Woods

But, the question is - why so many this year? I am pretty sure that it enjoyed a very high breeding success rate in 2014 (rather as the Snowy Owl did, but for different although interlinked reasons) which increases the pressure on winter food sources. That high population assumption is strengthened by the fact that Varied Thrushes have been showing up in unusually high numbers down to Southern California, so it's not just the Sierra that is hosting them this winter.

Consequently, given their irruptive, sort of nomadic, winter lifestyle along with population levels apparently not seen since the late 1970s, they have discovered plentiful food sources in the Sierra. Their diet changes from insects, beetles and spiders etc. during the breeding season to berries, acorns and seeds during winter – plus your feeders. Furthermore, being a very shy bird, temperamentally better suited to dense forests than open lands, it needs good ground cover while foraging for food, and all of these assets are available here. So, the message is clear – enjoy them until they depart in March or April because you may not see them next year!

**Barry Boulton**

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### “LOVE THE BIRDS” - SALT SPRING VALLEY VALENTINE FIELD TRIP NOTES

Spring was clearly in the air on our Valentine's Day field trip to Salt Spring Valley near Copperopolis. This was exemplified by the male Western Meadowlarks singing their melodious song, one enthusiast even perched about thirty feet up on top of an oak tree which is an unusually high elevation. I must say that I'm always amused by the singing male because he sings a very short song or phrase – and then he looks around as if to see who's impressed. When nobody appreciates him, he does it again, and again, and again..... I can just hear the ladies saying “typical male” .....and they'd be quite correct!

We saw both male and female Phainopeplas in oak trees infested with mistletoe – the Phainopepla's favorite food being mistletoe berries. When you see the male's coat, you know why this species is so named – Phainopepla derives from Greek meaning “shining coat”, and so it does. Western Bluebirds were also abundant and happy to regale us with their splendid plumage, and of course many White-crowned Sparrows and a few Savannah Sparrows also decoyed us in passing.

I was personally over-joyed to see several Ferruginous Hawks (the largest hawk in North America) close enough to appreciate their plumage; much as I love Red-tailed Hawks, a “change is as good as a rest”. The last one that we saw actually kited to stay in one place in mid-air for, perhaps, 15 seconds, which appears from the literature to be unusual behavior - lucky for us.

The day's highlight was an aerial dogfight that I initially assumed was the usual mobbing of a large bird by one or more smaller ones. However, in this case on closer observation, a Common Raven was chasing an American Kestrel, apparently trying to kill it. I was impressed by the maneuverability of the Raven that executed amazingly tight turns to keep close to the Kestrel. It seemed to me that the Kestrel would fade away and be captured, but then, good fortune seemed to step in; the Raven's partner returned to a place nearby on the ground and he left the chase to join her. Perhaps he rather than the Kestrel was tiring?

**Barry Boulton**

## RECENT BIRD SIGHTINGS

### **Ken & Eve Smith rambles**

*[Editor's note: Ken and Eve often take off for the day, driving around the region looking for birds. This is one report that gives you some ideas about where you might take a birding excursion].*

**S**aturday January 24 - well, we left the house in Chinese Camp about noon to go to BLM's Red Hills Area of Concern. Along the way were 100+ Golden-Crowned Sparrows (we've never seen so many - they seemed to be everywhere), 40+ Bushtits and small numbers of White-crowned Sparrows, Scrub Jays, Fox Sparrows, Spotted Towhees, California Towhees and Ruby-crowned Kinglets.

**T**hen off to Willms Rd and Rock River Rd near Knights Ferry via Hwy 108/120 westbound. We always check the various ponds along this highway. Parking is sparse at a couple of them so be careful, particularly during the dry season; we don't want any catalytic converter grass fires. On the ponds were Buffleheads, American Widgeon and Ring-necked Ducks.

**S**outh-shore Tullock Lake Rd has three ponds with parking off the hwy. The east pond usually is a good birding spot but today only a few American Coots. This pond was nearly dry due to the drought prior to recent rains so I suspect the food source hadn't developed sufficiently. West pond is larger and there were Buffleheads, Ruddy Ducks, Mallards, Gadwall, American Widgeon, Canada Geese, Killdeer, American Kestrels, Common Goldeneyes and Great Egrets.

**W**illms Rd @ 108 - 50+ Starlings, Say's Phoebes, Turkey Vultures, White-Crowned Sparrows and Savannah Sparrows. Not much at the Willms Ranch House, usually a good stop, while on the east side pond were American Coots, Ruddy Ducks and several Horned Larks. Then we saw a probable Eastern Phoebe. *[Ed. This is a rare bird in the US West].* It was on a fence wire 2.2 miles N of the Willms Rd/Rock River Rd junction. We were able to observe the bird for several minutes as it was feeding. I was able to view it with my 25/75 spotting scope for about 30 seconds before it flew from the area. The bird was rather busy, soft wingbars, constantly dipping its tail downward. Our reference was Sibley's Field Guide, and Merlin (bird app.) on my cell phone. It did not appear to be a female or juvenile Black Phoebe.

**R**ock River Rd: Ferruginous Hawk, Starlings at the Clay Pits, Red-tailed Hawks. At the pond on N side at 108 the viewing was difficult as it was late and getting foggy, but there was a Mute Swan.

**S**unday 25th - off to see if the Mute Swan was still there, but no luck. However, there were 75+ American Widgeon, Gadwall, Ruddy Ducks, Buffleheads, Ring-necked

Ducks, Double Crested Cormorants, 25+ Killdeer, American Kestrel and several Turkey Vultures.

**A**t T-Bar-J area checked for Tri-colored Blackbirds but none around. Enroute: Fox Sparrows, 60+ Savannah Sparrows, several hundred Western Meadowlarks (they're everywhere in this habitat) and 40+ Lark Sparrows. This was the largest flock of Lark Sparrows I have ever seen and they were actively feeding in the grass along with Meadowlarks,

**Ken Smith, Field Trip Chairman**

Jan 27

**I**hike the Arnold Rim Trail regularly. Pacific Wren are setting up their territories with full throated songs as well as Brown Creepers...in January!...saw a female (unknown) hummingbird in the green Mountain Lilac at 4000' last week, Varied Thrush x2...not so unusual. But the hummers and creepers singing.....its like March!

**Nancy E. Muleady-Mecham,**

Jan 29

**W**e have a pair of Eurasian Collared-Doves frequenting our feeder - new to us! Mourning Doves and Band-tailed Pigeons are common here. Also, we are seeing Lark Sparrows now.

**Jerry Fueslein, Groveland, 2,800 ft.**

Jan 29

**S**aw the first Tree Swallows of the season. Also, a Hermit Thrush congregating with the Sparrows at my feeder. They are not very common down here.

**Charlotte Ginn, Red Hills, Chinese Camp, 957 ft.**

Feb 7

**F**or several days now there have been six Common Mergansers in the duck pond on Cedar Lane in Arnold. They are so beautiful to watch.

**Callye Caccamo, Arnold, 4,000 ft.**

February 24

**Y**esterday and today I was surprised with an Evening Grosbeak pair. This was the first time for this bird in 10 years of feeding here in Tuolumne. Also we had a Downey Woodpecker today. These come around from time to time.

**Jon Sturtevant, Tuolumne Township, 2,600 ft.**

February 24

**T**his is the first year I've seen or heard a Hermit Thrush. I think they may have built a nest in my oak tree because I hear them singing every day.

**Linda Emerson, Jamestown**

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## CSAS FIELD TRIPS

### March 4 & April 1 GCS D 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 more than 200 acres of oak, pine and willow habitat with three water storage ponds. On the Feb 4 walk 26 species were seen. Highlights were Bewick's Wren and Purple Finch.

Meet the group in the GCS D 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**.

### March 21 "Lower String of Pearls", Oakdale

This birding trip will cover the lower section of the "String of Pearls" ponds, starting near Oakdale (we birded the upper section a few months ago and saw lots of interesting species).

Meet at Perko's in Sonora at 8:00 AM to carpool and share fuel costs. When this trip was led by Jean Hackmack some years ago, we saw lots of interesting birds. We will probably end the day in a restaurant in Oakdale (suggestions welcome.)

**Trip Leader: Paolo Maffei 532-8426.**

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## SAN JOAQUIN AUDUBON FIELD TRIP

### March 8 Cosumnes River Preserve / River Walk

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](http://www.cosumnes.org) for last minute updates. Double check with Jim for start time.

## STANISLAUS AUDUBON FIELD TRIP

### March 15 The San Joaquin River NWR

This huge and most diverse of habitats includes mixed species transitional savannas, riparian forest, oak woodlands, grassland, and seasonal wetlands. Trip leader, Ralph Baker ([sharks\\_hockey\\_maniac@yahoo.com](mailto: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.

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### EDYE DINGMAN CENTRAL SIERRA AUDUBON and MACK WAGGONER SIERRA CLUB SCHOLARSHIP

Central Sierra Audubon is offering two \$2,000 scholarships and Tuolumne Group Sierra Club is offering one \$1,000 scholarship to students pursuing an undergraduate or graduate degree in natural sciences. The recipients may apply for renewal of the scholarships upon the successful completion of the first academic year.

Preference will be given to graduates from a high school in either Calaveras or Tuolumne County or those who have attended Columbia College and will have completed two years of undergraduate college work with a minimum of a 2.5 GPA.

Deadline for applications is March 15, 2015. The application form can be downloaded from the CSAS website at: <http://centralsierraudubon.org/>

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*"One touch of nature makes the whole world kin"*

**William Shakespeare**

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## 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.centralsierraudubon.org](http://www.centralsierraudubon.org)

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