

Central Sierra Audubon Society

# Sierra Squawker



[www.centralsierraaudubon.org](http://www.centralsierraaudubon.org)

January - 2017

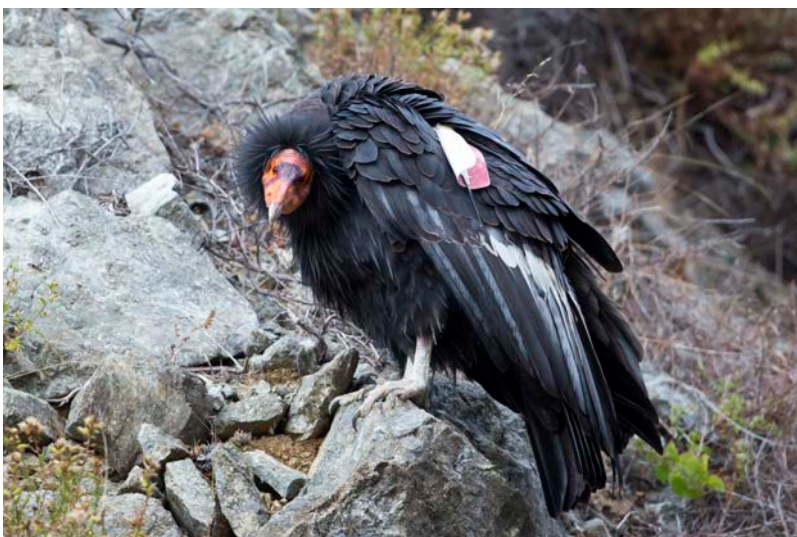
PUBLIC PROGRAM - JANUARY 18th at 7pm

## “Bringing Back the California Condor”

An exploration of the history and outlook for mainland  
America's largest and most endangered bird

Presented by Alacia Welch & Gavin Emmons

Alacia dedicated the last ten years to California Condor recovery by working as a field crew leader at Pinnacles National Park. Meanwhile, Gavin is the longest-running raptor biologist at Pinnacles with 14 years under his belt. Additionally, Gavin works as a technical specialist for the Condor Program. Between the two of them, they have 30 years of experience as naturalists. A love for wildlife and nature guided both of their paths from childhood into their careers. Alacia studied biology at Grinnell College and within a year of graduation took an internship at Pinnacles.



Gavin graduated from Lewis and Clark College with degrees in Anthropology and Sociology and then spent five years doing wildlife work abroad and in California and New Mexico before becoming the raptor biologist at Pinnacles. Here, Alacia and Gavin met and found they shared many interests including birds and travel.

After a few years they married and on their trail through life they studied Gouldian finches in Australia, counted raptors in Idaho, and trapped Cape rockjumpers in South Africa. They continue to enjoy working with the large birds of Pinnacles and traveling when possible.

Join us at **7 PM, January 18th** in the **Tuolumne County Library on Greenley Road in Sonora** to enjoy this 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.

### UPCOMING 2017 PUBLIC PROGRAMS

**February 15, 2017:** **Tori Seher**  
**Birds of Alcatraz**

**March 15, 2017:** **David Wimpfheimer**  
**Subject TBD**

**April 19, 2017:** **Steven Umland**  
**eBird - using it, and its value**

**May 17, 2017:** **Tom Hahn**  
**Subject TBD**

## SIGHTINGS & BEHAVIORS

Dec. 3

I birded the first 2.5 miles of Cherry Lake Rd from Hwy 120 about 12 miles east of Groveland this morning. I saw 4 Wrentits. Other highlights were Downy Woodpecker, Bell's Sparrow and Fox Sparrow.

**Jeanne Ridgley, Groveland.**

Dec. 6

Golden Eagle - finally! My first sighting of this magnificent bird. I was doubly treated, as it turned out, there were two Golden Eagles, a pair! After my first observation, they flew off and we headed down the road, we returned to the same area a short time later to see them again. This time they were being harassed by a pair of Common Ravens. Quite the afternoon! Location: Sims Rd. below Hwy 120 before it joins Red Hills Rd. Elevation around 1200'

**Kit DeGear, Sonora**

Dec. 7

Three birders joined me for the 1st Wed Bird Walk at GCSD on Ferretti Rd in Groveland. We saw 30 species. Highlights were American Pipit, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Song Sparrow, Lincoln's Sparrow, and White-crowned Sparrow.

**Jeanne Ridgley, Groveland**

Dec. 7

At Lakemont Pines pond there were the 12 Hooded Mergansers, mixed male and female, that have been there for at least two weeks. Meanwhile, White Pines Lake hosted 11 Green-winged Teal in fairly tight formation, 2 Buffleheads and 7 Hooded Mergansers,

**Barry Boulton, Murphys**

Dec. 16

FOS at Lakemont Pines pond - 6 Common Mergansers, about a month after the FOS Hooded Merganser.

Dec. 19

FOS at Lakemont Pines pond - 6 Ring-necked Ducks in three apparently bonded pairs.

**John Sutake, Arnold**

## UPCOMING FIELD TRIPS

### **Jan. 4 & Feb. 1 - GCSD Wednesday Walk**

The first Wednesday of the month Bird Walk at the Groveland Community Services property at 18966 Ferretti Road, Groveland will be led by Jeanne Ridgley on Jan 4 and Feb 1. The property encompasses an area of more than 200 acres of oak, pine and willow habitat with three water storage ponds.

**B**irders who wish to bird at this site must be accompanied by an authorized birder and sign an Agreement and Release from Liability Form.

**M**eeet the group in the GCSD 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 about two-three hours.

**Jeanne Ridgley (209)962-7598**

## BITTERN AT MERCED NWR

**K**en and Eve Smith visited the Merced NWR on December 4th when they spotted this American Bittern out in the open. Most of the day bitterns spend retired in the reeds standing in an upright position so that their long streaky plumage acts as perfect camouflage among the reeds. But, even bitterns occasionally come out and feed in the open.



**K**en's shot shows the power of using a scope with smart-phone attached, and the bittern is a perfect subject because it tends to stay motionless for long periods. The trick is to see it in the first place - not easy by any means; you need eagle-eyes and, of course, a little bit of luck - just like Ken!

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## CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT RESULTS

### **Groveland CBC - Dec. 14**

**T**hank to all who participated on Dec. 14th. We sure lucked out with the nice weather! All in all, there were not a lot of surprises out there. The bulk of the species experienced lower numbers this year, although they were in the historical range for this count, only 26 Mourning Doves were found, 1

less than the previous low in 2009. The following did not show up but should have: Western and Clark's Grebes, Ruddy Duck, Cooper's Hawk, Killdeer, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Pine Siskin, and Red-winged Blackbird. There is a lot of food out there that is accessible so the absence of these are a puzzler.

On the other hand, what is up with those crazy Lawrence's Goldfinch! There were 51 found! That surpassed 2007, the only other year they were seen, by 45. Amazing. We also doubled the highest tally of **American Dippers** with 2 found in the Moccasin Area. The 9 Say's Phoebe beat the high of 8 found in 2009. We did add a new species - single Lincoln's Sparrows were found in two areas.

This was the seventh Groveland CBC. We found 3633 individuals of 77 species. The first year of the Count saw an incredible 99 species and 9765 individuals while the lowest count occurred in 2011 with only 2374 birds of 61 species.

**Steven Umland**

### **Sonora CBC - Dec. 17**

Thirty seven birders took to the field for our 32nd Sonora CBC to find 5,715 birds of 96 species. From a low of 29° to a high of 65° the skies remained clear all day. There was little to no frozen water to hinder the birds.

Of those species seen, 26 were at a ten-year low: Mallard, Ring-necked Duck, CA Quail, Cooper's Hawk, American Kestrel, Common Moorhen, Band-tailed Pigeon, Anna's Hummingbird, Nuttall's Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, American Crow, Western Bluebird, American Robin, Northern Mockingbird, European Starling, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Spotted and California Towhee, White- and Golden-crowned Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco, Western Meadowlark, Brewer's Blackbird, House Finch, and Lesser Goldfinch hit rock bottom as far as the count went. American Goldfinch experienced its highest number for the period. Northern Goshawk and Williamson's Sapsucker made rare appearances in the eastern part of the count area.

Given the vagaries of actually getting out and counting, it is difficult to actually say WHY these numbers are so low as the total number of birds seen was the lowest in 10 years. I will have a more in-depth analysis next month. Suffice to say, many of the lows are far off the average for the past 10 years. I hope everyone has a great bird filled 2017!

**Steven Umland**

### **HOW WILL YOUR LIFE LIST FARE THIS YEAR?**

When putting together the materials for the Christmas Bird Count every year, I try to keep apprised of all the new information related to bird taxonomy. As I was perusing the California Bird Records Committee's checklist for the birds of California, I noticed that the House Sparrow was not at the end of the list. It has been a comfortable bookend here for quite a while

and my interest was piqued. On my search for it, it became apparent that there were many other surprises waiting. I then received the October issue of Birder's Guide and the mix-up mystery was solved.

**What Is a Species?** This is an important question as we deal with this with every new field guide we purchase, or tally up all the birds we have seen in a day's outing. The jargon goes like this, species are "considered to be genetically cohesive groups of populations that are reproductively isolated from other such groups" (AOU, 1998). For many of our life lists, this isolation is important. A stable, narrow, band of overlap where hybridization occurs is a sign that you are dealing with two separate species. Examples include: Baltimore/Bullock's Oriole; Myrtle/Audubon's Warbler. On the other hand, a wide, always changing, area of overlap, as in the case of the Northern Flicker, denotes a single species (except, in this case they are considering a split! Go figure).

With all this in mind, there may be another large shake up in the Checklist of American Birds this year: last year it was a shuffling of the families; this year it will deal with the lumping/splitting of species in which you will probably see old feathered friends reappear.

Here are some of the potential changes that MAY materialize this year: Western and Clark's Grebe to be lumped; Red-shouldered Hawk to be split into the Red-shouldered Hawk and the Red-breasted Hawk (ours); Northern Flicker into Red- and Yellow-Shafted Flicker (and two others); Red-breasted Sapsucker into Northern and Southern (ours) Red-breasted Sapsucker; Dark-eyed Junco split into Slate-colored and Oregon (and five others). There are many others in the wind and I will try to address them next month.

**Steven Umland**

### **HIGHWAY CLEAN-UP**

The next Adopt-a-Highway cleanup will be on Friday, January 20th. Meet at Perko's at 7:30am to carpool to the Lake Don Pedro vista parking lot, or meet at the vista point at 8.00am. You probably know that the vista point is filled with Caltrans machinery and equipment as they work on the bridge, but that's not a problem for us to do our clean-up. We will return to Perko's by 10am.

**Tom Harrington (209)694-8564**

## DUCKS TO ENJOY HERE DURING THE SIERRA WINTER

by Barry Boulton, Editor

We all probably have ambivalent views on winter time, perhaps depending largely on our winter sport interests, but one thing we can say is that this is the time to see ducks! Wherever you can find an open stretch of water, lake, pond, forebay, treatment plant and suchlike, there you will find ducks in all their splendor. Duck-time it is, so gather your binoculars, spouse, grandparents, children and grandchildren and give them all a treat! Remember, the difference between male and female ducks is usually quite dramatic, with the males being highly colored and the females much more subdued.

In this article I'll show you many of the ducks you will likely see along with likely places where you'll see them. Of course, there are likely to be birds other than ducks to delight you, but here my focus is ducks. You may have seen ducks behaving in certain ways but didn't think too much about it. For instance, some ducks seem to dive under water as soon as they see you – not surprisingly, they're called "diving ducks" because they forage completely submerged. But you might have noticed that others don't dive down, they just put their heads underwater while their legs and butts stick out of the water; to us they look rather comical. They are called "dabbling ducks" because they're foraging at and just under the water's surface, or in mud along the sides. So, we have two



**Buffleheads**

**Bufflehead** pair, male at left (diving duck). Note the male's white back of head. Be careful to not confuse with the Common or Barrow's Goldeneye. *Photo - Peggy Sells*



**Barrow's Goldeneyes**

**Barrow's Goldeneye** pair, male at left (diving duck). Note the elongated white facial marking. *Photo - Peggy Sells*



**Common Goldeneye**  
female

**Common Goldeneye**, female. *Photo - Barry Boulton*

general classes, the diving and the dabbling ducks, but foraging style is not their only difference. If you see them on land, the diving ducks waddle very awkwardly because their legs are set well back at the rear end, while the dabbling ducks have them more centrally located and walk much more easily. Those leg locations affect the ways in which these two groups of ducks get into the air.

Ducks in both groups use their webbed feet to help propel them out of the water but whereas the dabbling ducks feet are situated correctly for a quick take-off so they rise immediately out of the water, the diving ducks need to start moving along in the water before they can get their feet into propulsion mode, and so they have a longer and lower take-off trajectory. As you'll see in a few moments, the Common Merganser is a superb example of that take-off trajectory.



**Common Goldeneye - male**

**Common Goldeneye**, male. Note the circular white facial marking compared to the Barrow's Goldeneye.

*Photo - Peggy Sells*

Actually, distinguishing between dabbling and diving ducks helps in distinguishing one species from another.

Green-winged Teal pair



**G**reen-winged Teal pair, male at left. This is a dabbling duck. Note the male's vertical white stripe at the shoulder. The male's green head stripe is similar to that of the American Wigeon, but the Wigeon is rare at higher Sierra elevations.

*Photo - Barry Boulton*

Common Merganser - male



**A**s this male Common Merganser explodes into the air, you can see that his legs are right at the rear end, and that the take-off trajectory is shallow, telling us that this is a diving duck.

*Photo - Peggy Sells*

**T**he Common Merganser is a superb fisher and if you look closely at this female's bill you'll see that she is gripping her just-caught prey with horny, tooth-like projections along both mandibles. This species nests in tree cavities or rock crevices near large streams or lakes where clear water facilitates its underwater fishing.

**A**part from Mallards, Common Mergansers are the most common breeding ducks throughout the Sierra so during winter we are seeing both home mergansers and migrants from the north.

*Photo - Peggy Sells*

Common Merganser female



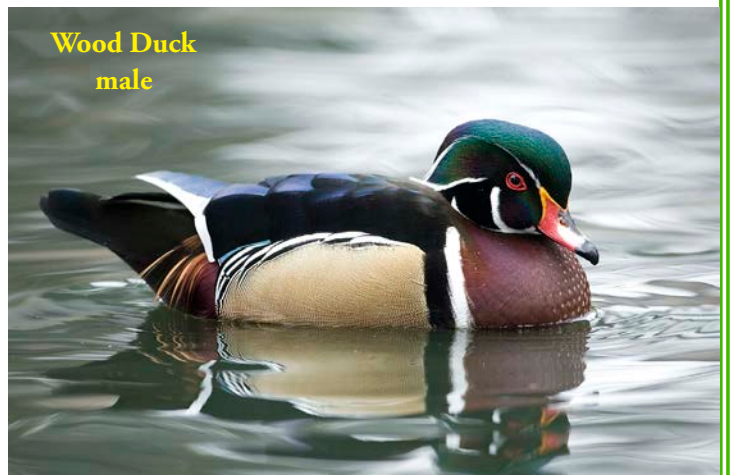
**T**he other merganser, the Hooded Merganser. The male shown here, with that foppish head looks very different from the Common Merganser. Actually, at a distance with only the white head patch visible, it's easy to confuse with the male Bufflehead.

*Photo - Peggy Sells*

Hooded Merganser - male



Wood Duck male



**T**he Wood Duck is another species that breeds in the lower elevations of the Sierra, so in wintertime the greater numbers we see are the influx of northern migrants seeking a warmer climate. After reduced populations in the early 1900s caused by excessive hunting and habitat loss, conservation measures have increased their numbers significantly. The only Sierra duck that can perch in trees, the female flies to a high perch at breeding time and summons the males to compete for her affection!

*Photo - Barry Boulton*

The **Ring-necked Duck** is one of those birds that's so oddly named for historical reasons. In the early days of birding, species were identified and described from specimens shot in the field. Well, this duck - male only - has a very faint chestnut collar that's difficult to see even at close range. It actually would be better called the Ring-billed Duck because both sexes have such a ring. Here, the male is on the right, the female left.

Anyway, whatever we call it, it's a common winter visitor in the Sierra up to around 4,000 ft. We see them every year at White Pines Lake which is at 4,000ft.

*Photo - Barry Boulton*



## SOME SUGGESTED LOCATIONS FOR DUCK-WATCHING

### TUOLUMNE COUNTY

- \* Rock River Road Pond, about two miles from junction of Green Springs Road and Rock River Road, to north of road.
- \* Ponds, west side of Bonds Flat Road, one-half mile south of junction of La Grange Road.
- \* Lake Don Pedro--several viewpoints along south side of lake (do not stop on dam).
- \* Hetch-Hetchy Moccasin pond and pond behind hatchery.
- \* Phoenix Lake, off Phoenix Lake road (very limited parking on Lori Lane, as it is a private road).
- \* New Melones Lake: from Sonora, north on Hwy. 49 turn off to right at New Melones Lake Visitor Center, then left onto road to free parking just below Hwy. 49 bridge.
- \* Willow Springs Pond, Highway 108, to right on Soulsbyville Road, then the first left on Kings Court there is a small parking area just before the pond.

### CALAVERAS COUNTY

- \* White Pines Lake behind the town of Arnold.
- \* Lakemont Pines on the left just before you enter Arnold on Hwy. 4. This is a private road so be considerate.

- \* Copperopolis Pond just off Hwy. 4 on Rock River Road opposite the Copperopolis turn-off.
- \* Hwy. 49, north end of Angels Camp Rd., just past Angels Camp Bypass, right on Dogtown Road about one mile to Lakeside Dr. on left, just past Dogtown Orchards (this is a private road so be courteous).

### STANISLAUS COUNTY

- \* Dawson Lake--La Grange Road, one mile south of Hwy. 132 intersection.
- \* Pond along Willms Road, about 2 miles south of junction of Hwys. 108-120.
- \* Stream exiting same Pond southward to where it crosses Willms road, nearly two miles south
- \* Joe Domecq Wilderness Area Lake Road, off Hwy. 132, two miles south of Jct. La Grange Rd.
- \* Also, across Lake Rd. from Joe Domecq, Tuolumne River by old Basso Bridge, parking lot beside new bridge.

**Please note that some of the waterways are private property and so you should not enter prior to gaining permission.**

### 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 Starbucks conference room at Tuolumne Road just off Mono Way/108.

#### 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/join-us/](http://www.centralsierraudubon.org/join-us/)

### YOUR AUDUBON BOARD

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