

# Sierra Squawker



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

December - 2017

## Join a CSAS Christmas Bird Count (CBC)

Prior to the turn of the 20th century, hunters engaged in a holiday tradition known as the Christmas "Side Hunt." They would choose sides and go afield with their guns—whoever brought in the biggest pile of feathered (and furred) quarry won.

Conservation was in its beginning stages in that era, and many observers and scientists were becoming concerned about declining bird populations. Beginning on Christmas Day 1900, ornithologist Frank M. Chapman, an early officer in the then-nascent Audubon Society, proposed a new holiday tradition—a "**Christmas Bird Census**" that would count birds during the holidays rather than hunt them.

So began the Christmas Bird Count. Thanks to the inspiration of Chapman and the enthusiasm of 27 dedicated birders, 25 Christmas Bird Counts were held that day. The locations ranged from Toronto, Ontario to Pacific Grove, California with most counts in or near the population centers of northeastern North America. Those original 27 Christmas Bird Counters tallied around 90 species on all the counts combined.

Each November and December, birders interesting in participating in a CBC can sign up and join in a local CBC. From December 14 through January 5 each year tens of thousands of volunteers throughout the Americas brave snow, wind, or rain, and take part in the effort. Audubon and other organizations use data collected in this long-running wildlife census to assess the health of bird populations, and to help guide conservation action.

The **National Audubon Society** was incorporated in 1905, and is named in honor of **John James Audubon**, a Franco-American ornithologist and naturalist who painted, cataloged, and described the birds of North America in his famous book *Birds of America*, published in sections between 1827 and 1838.

**So yes, it's that time again** - we need volunteers of **ALL** skill levels, to help with counting our winter feathered friends in our three local Christmas Bird Counts. Each Count takes place within a 15-mile diameter circle. The count circle is broken up into sectors that are counted by teams of observers, each team being led by experienced birder. If you're new birder and not confident about identifying birds, it doesn't matter because that's the role of the team leader; but you can provide "eyes on the ground" which is important because the first step is simply to see a bird – identification comes next. In any case, this is a thoroughly enjoyable and satisfying experience to spend the day outside looking for birds and generally socializing.

**Groveland CBC: Thursday, December 14th**, 8am - 4pm followed by pizza in Groveland.  
Organizer: Steven Umland at (209)352-6985 or [stevenum71@gmail.com](mailto:stevenum71@gmail.com)

**Sonora CBC: Saturday, December 16th**, 8am - 4pm followed by potluck at the County Ambulance building on Striker Court in Sonora.  
Organizer: Steven Umland at (209)352-6985 or [stevenum71@gmail.com](mailto:stevenum71@gmail.com)

**Calaveras CBC: Saturday, December 30th**, 8am - 4pm followed by pizza in Murphys.  
Organizers: Keith & Sandra Maurer at (209)728-8979 or [kandsmaurer@goldrush.com](mailto:kandsmaurer@goldrush.com)

## UPCOMING FIELD TRIPS

### Dec. 6 - GCSD

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 December 6. The property encompasses an area of more than 200 acres of oak, pine and willow habitat with three water storage ponds.

On the November 1 Bird Walk, 37 species were seen. A **Red-naped Sapsucker** sighting was the 147th species seen here in the last ten years. **Bufflehead** have returned to the large pond for the winter. A **Merlin** and a **Red-breasted Sapsucker** were also seen

Meet 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.

Birders who wish to bird at GCSD must be accompanied by an authorized birder and have signed an Agreement and Release from Liability.

Jeanne Ridgley 962-7598.

## SIGHTINGS & BEHAVIORS

### Nov. 2

FOS (first of season) **Hooded Mergansers** at Lakemont close by Arnold, elevation just shy of 4,000ft. Three each male and female - presumably pairs. **Barry Boulton**



*Hooded Merganser (m) at Lakemont*

### Nov. 5

Sitting on our deck with morning coffee (8:05am), I heard the cry of the **Bald Eagle**. I looked up to the Pine tree (looks like 2 but is actually 1 tree that has split into 2 trunks) that they favor and first noticed one, then realized its mate was in the top of the other 15 feet away. It would appear our Phoenix Lake Eagle pair is back!

**Kit DeGear, Phoenix Lake, elev. 2400', Sonora**

### Nov. 6

FOS, three **Ring-necked Ducks** on White Pines Lake (Arnold), elevation 2,000ft. **Barry Boulton**

### Nov. 7

Today I made a brief visit to Salt Springs Valley Reservoir. At the southeast end of the reservoir, two **Snow Geese** were hanging out with a group of **Canada Geese**.

**John Harris, Oakdale**

### Nov. 13

I was outside refilling the feeders off the deck was when I first heard the tapping right above my head in the blue oak – a male **Red-naped Sapsucker** with red throat, mottled back, red crown, busily tapping away. This sapsucker is very seldom seen at this elevation, and I watched him for several minutes in perfect viewing conditions. He was our 126th Yard Bird.

**John Turner, Lake Don Pedro home, Tuolumne County**

### Nov. 14

FOS three **Common Goldeneyes** at Utica pond just above Murphys.

### Nov. 19

Good birding day in my garden, with **Mountain Chickadees**, migrating **Chestnut-backed Chickadees** (northern sub-species from the Cascades and Oregon regions), both **Ruby-crowned** and **Golden-crowned Kinglets**, **Red-breasted Nuthatch**, two migrating **Townsend's Warblers** and several **Juncos**.

### Nov. 23

Two **Brown Creepers** in my garden, one enjoying the bird bath, the other foraging on an incense cedar tree, plus a **Fox Sparrow**, **Hermit Thrush** and **Spotted Towhee**.

### Nov. 26

An **American Robin** and a **Hermit Thrush** came through my garden today, presumably migrating downslope to warmer weather. Perhaps they were keeping company on their short journey?

### Nov. 30

**Green-winged Teal** is uncommon at Lakemont near Arnold, but 5 were here today. Also have 12 **Hooded Mergansers** spending time variously at Lakemont, Meadowmont and possibly at White Pines Lake and Hunter Dam.

**John Sutake, Arnold, 4,000 ft. elev.**

### Nov. 26 - Indigeny Reserve Walk

There were 5 of us for the Nov. 26th Indigeny Bird Walk. All in all a fairly quiet day; I wonder if the birds were hunkered down for the impending storm? Highlight was the Sharp-shinned Hawk just hanging out above our heads in an Oak by the parking lot. 25 species in total were seen.

**Note:** next Indigeny bird walk will be January 28, 2018.

**Kit DeGear, Phoenix Lake, Sonora**

## BOOK REVIEWS

### **The "Origin" Then and Now: an Interpretive Guide to the "Origin of Species"**

**By David Reznick. Princeton Press \$27.95**

If you've read Darwin's original book, *The Origin of Species*, you'll know that it's not an easy read, not least that it's rather long-winded by modern standards. But, this version by evolutionary biologist David Reznick, is very readable with the great advantage being that he interprets what Darwin was saying, and why he said it in particular ways. For example, Darwin was less concerned about the precise definition of "species", or even the actual origin of species (despite his book's title) than he was in destroying the time-honored notion of individual and immutable species creation by a purposeful creator.

Reznick then goes on to explain up-to-the-minute scientific discoveries that gives us deeper insight than Darwin enjoyed because the science of genetics wasn't known at the time. For instance, it took a long time for Mendel's work to see the light of day and then to be fully understood and incorporated into natural selection and evolution.

The chapter on natural selection is, as we might expect, particularly fascinating because it gets to the core of Darwin's analysis, and this is where Reznick looks at Darwin's distinction between natural and sexual selection, as well as at two other acknowledged forms of selection (that is, evolution is not just by natural selection alone).

In summary, this book is a tour de force of Darwin's original work supplemented by modern understanding. I can highly recommend it.

### **The Evolution of Beauty: how Darwin's Forgotten Theory of Mate Choice Shapes the Animal World - and Us**

**By Richard Prum. Doubleday \$30**

Professor of Ornithology at Yale University and Head Curator of Vertebrate Zoology at the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, Richard Prum has built upon Darwin's original (and rarely noticed) thesis that female birds and mammals may exercise "aesthetic choice" ("a taste for the beautiful") when considering a prospective mate.

This contrasts with the generally accepted "*handicap principle*" whereby a male's plumage or antlers etc. must indicate greater fitness because otherwise those big handicaps would most likely cause him to die of predation or difficulty in obtaining sufficient food or protection to survive. Under this scheme, females recognize the male's extra fitness and selects him for her mate.

However, Darwin didn't see it that way and now Prum has built on Darwin's idea with examples, analysis and arguments to show that sexual selection based upon an aesthetic perception on the part of females is a very likely and legitimate selection process.

We've all seen David Attenborough or similar videos showing the amazing plumages and antics of male Birds of Paradise in order to attract a female, and we may have difficulty in comprehending that a female bird may have aesthetic sensibilities. But, what is it that the female selects for? How can, for example, a flashing blue plume or spectacular Peacock's tail indicate fitness to her? How can she possibly evaluate fitness per se? Reznick argues that it is indeed a sense of beauty that she's looking for, and that as a cultural artifact, it can and does evolve.

Unusually for an ornithologist, he takes this theme of aesthetic sexual selection into the human realm and thus human evolutionary psychology. This move into human evolution plus plentiful end notes makes this book a somewhat deeper read than Reznick's on "The Origin", but a fascinating one never-the-less.

### **Secrets of the Oak Woodlands Plants & Animals among California's Oaks**

**By Kate Marianchild. Heyday Books \$18.00**

This delightful little book by local (Mendocino) author Kate Marianchild takes us into the value of oak woodlands to many of California's native wildlife through the windows provided by particular species.

For example, she considers several birds including the Acorn Woodpecker, Western Bluebird and California Quail and discusses their relationships to and dependence on the oaks.

She similarly discusses oak mistletoe and its relationship to other species, not least the Western Bluebird (new for me) and the Phainopepla. In each such case, she tells delightful little anecdotes that makes each species so personal and interesting.

In the case of the Acorn Woodpecker and Western Bluebirds, I found the details of their multi-generational, social support systems quite fascinating.

This book is one that you'll really want to read to your partner because it's too good to read alone; you simply must share it with a loved one.

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**Book reviews by Barry Boulton**

## OF INTEREST

University of Cambridge researchers have discovered that females of cooperative breeding birds and fish species have apparently evolved the adaptive ability to reduce the size of their eggs when helpers are available to help protect, incubate and feed the offspring.

The idea is that by producing smaller eggs, she invests less energy in the eggs, and their production time is shortened. Spending less energy on the eggs means that she can spend more on herself, thus increasing her chances of survival into the next breeding season. It also means that she can move into a second clutch of eggs more quickly because of shortened egg production time.

The bottom line here is that the female's chances of living longer and producing more eggs and young over her lifetime are increased. In that case, her offspring which themselves will adopt this energy-reduction and life-lengthening behavior, will increase in the species population and so normalize the behavior.

In our region, Acorn Woodpeckers and Western Bluebirds exploit multi-generational cooperative support and commonly two broods, so the as-yet-unanswered question for us is whether their ancestors produced larger eggs and less broods before they evolved into the cooperative mode?

### POSSIBLE BIRDING LOCATIONS IN TUOLUMNE & CALAVERAS COUNTIES

Go to our webpage where these locations are described:  
<http://centralsierraudubon.org/birding-locations/>

Additionally, if you're interested in the birds of **Big Trees State Park**, scroll down to that section where, with a single click, you can download the list of possible birds at BTSP.

### **CSAS SCHOLARSHIPS - 2018**

At our monthly meeting on November 15th, the Board of CSAS decided to award academic scholarships in 2018 as we have in past years. CSAS is offering up to \$4,000 in scholarships to students of at least junior standing in college who are pursuing an undergraduate or graduate degree in Natural or Environmental Sciences. Preference will be given to alumni of a high school in either Calaveras or Tuolumne Counties or those who have attended Columbia College. Recipients may apply for renewal of the scholarships upon successful completion of the academic year.

Details and the application form can be found on our website at: [http://centralsierraudubon.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/CSAS\\_scholarship\\_instructions\\_revision\\_2017-11-25.pdf](http://centralsierraudubon.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/CSAS_scholarship_instructions_revision_2017-11-25.pdf)

### **CSAS FACEBOOK PAGE**

If you didn't know it, CSAS has a very professional Facebook page hosted by Dan Webster which is well worth visiting quite frequently. Dan links interesting feeds and articles about birds from many sources at:

<https://www.facebook.com/Central-Sierra-Audubon-Society-215490338478857/>

**Or click on the red button below:**

<https://www.facebook.com/Central-Sierra-Audubon-Society-215490338478857/>

### **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, August, and December), 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 CSAS Officers**

|                                  |               |
|----------------------------------|---------------|
| Barry Boulton, President         | (209)596-0612 |
| Tom Parrington, Past President   | (209)928-3835 |
| Walt Kruse, VP Conservation      | (707)548-1829 |
| Kit DeGear, VP Programs          | (925)822-5215 |
| Jeanne Ridgley, Secretary        | (209)962-7598 |
| Linda Millspaugh, Treasurer      | (209)586-9557 |
| Ken Smith, Field Trips           | (949)922-1455 |
| Pattie Henderson, Membership     | (209)586-2169 |
| Jan Jorn-Baird, Publicity        | (209)532-1106 |
| Barry Boulton, Newsletter Editor | (209)596-0612 |

#### **Your CSAS Committees**

|                                     |               |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|
| Ron & Barbara McDow, Bird Box Trail | (650)391-5277 |
| Tom Harrington, Book Sales          | (209)694-8564 |
| Pamela Blair, Scholarship           | (209)533-1668 |
| John Turner, Website                | (209)852-2348 |
| Steven Umland, Sightings/eBird      | (209)352-6985 |