

Sierra Squawker



Celebrating Sex - Avian of course!

Spring is that time of renewal when the avian world's energies are directed to thoughts of love - or something like that... It is the time when birds' personalities are writ large and often publicly for us to observe, whether as hobbyists, naturalists - or voyeurs, so we do well to celebrate this new influx of life.

Even so, it takes time, energy and skill to observe and capture these activities which is exactly what **Maggie Sanchez** our student contributor has done with her camera as you'll see here. I'm impressed with the way in which she captures and articulates the essence of each species.

Meanwhile, I just returned from the Mono Lake Chautauqua (fancy name for their excellent annual bird festival) where my personal highlight was to observe and videoshoot the breeding behavior of a pair of Lewis's Woodpeckers as I'll describe later in this issue.

Narrative & Photos by Maggie Sanchez

Species: Blue Grouse

I caught this handsome young male Blue Grouse in the act of attempting to attract a mate while exploring our Stanislaus National Forest. As soon as he spotted me, he ran for the hills, hopefully successfully finding a partner. I was quite surprised to find him in the open as they are a main course for the Goshawk.



Species: Common Bushtit

These little guys have proven difficult to capture with their speedy movements against my manual focus lens. The talkative nature of Bushtits' makes it easier to locate them, but their small stature makes actually spotting them a time-consuming task. Their social tendencies have caught my curiosity for the purpose of their mob-like travel arrangements.



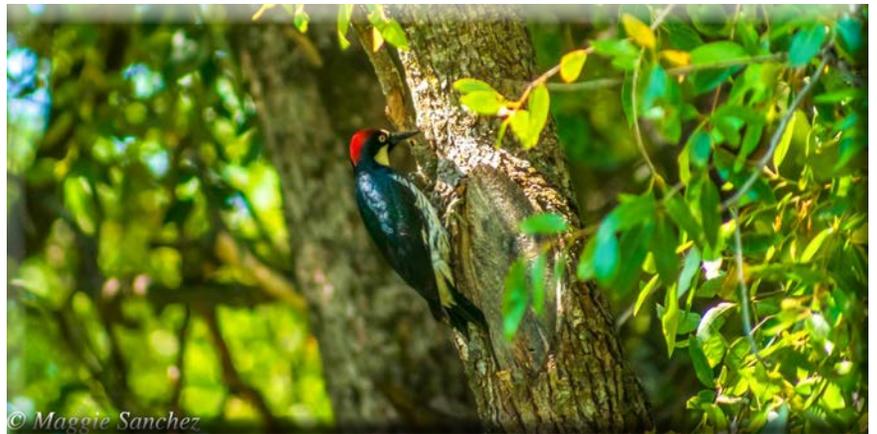
Species: Red- Breasted Sapsucker

This beautiful individual is taking advantage of this Alder tree's sweet treats in the early morning sun. As I watched, he flitted from branch to branch picking some sort of delicious morsels from its surface.



Species: Acorn Woodpecker

This male was hard at work gathering materials and food for his nest in the nearby oak tree. I've been spying on him and his mate for the past few weeks with the location of their nest just recently discovered. When I attempted to get a closer look, the female posted at the nest strangely froze. I immediately stopped in my tracks to see if I would get a reaction, but she simply sat there for almost five minutes. Suddenly, this male swooped in from behind me and they both flew off. I now knew my cover was completely blown and had to abort my mission. Their activity has still been high and I hope to see some fledglings in the near future.



Species: White-headed Woodpecker

Hanging up-side down from this flimsy branch, this male (females lack the red cap) kept his elegant composure while munching on some goodies. Woodpeckers enjoy a variety of food sources including the fruit Alder trees produce in the early summer. This particular individual had his own unique way of retrieving the best pieces.

[https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/White-headed Woodpecker#](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/White-headed_Woodpecker#)



Breeding Pair of Lewis's Woodpeckers

Location: in a snag in a previously heavily-burned Jeffrey Pine forest on highway 120 east of the Mono Lake south Tufa Tower reserve. Elevation 7,000 ft.

The Lewis's Woodpecker, named in honor of Meriwether Lewis of Lewis & Clark fame who captured a specimen during their trip in 1806, was initially called the Black Woodpecker by him before being renamed. It is one of only four woodpeckers worldwide that is sexually monochromatic - that is, male and female are identically colored. So, when observing the nest, it was a minor frustration (for me) to not be able to identify which is which. Never-the-less it is fascinating to watch because this is an unusual woodpecker. In the first place, it eats mostly insects, many of which it catches in the air and so has an unusually wide bill for that purpose. Also, it is one of the weaker excavators and is very likely to reuse the same cavity or take over an existing one in following years whereas the stronger excavators always change nesting cavity - which is why they are key-stone species.

The first thing you notice on looking at the cavity (see photo) is that the area around the hole is well-used; obviously something unusual is going on. When the adult arrives with food, you see that rather than entering the cavity to deliver food, he/she prepares the food by pulverizing it in a shallow cavity in the bark. This happens only for the first few days after the young hatch, maybe up to a week, and the reason is that the young cannot swallow and digest whole insects, but can accept only small parts (it is not known if the morsels are given directly, or are swallowed by the adult and then regurgitated inside the cavity/nest). In fact, not only does the adult pulverize the food outside the cavity, but it also caches parts of the pulverized food in the bark; we can say that the worn area is both anvil and short-term granary. Then, after delivering the first morsel, it may come out to retrieve more and takes it back inside to the young. I noticed on occasion (not always by any means) that there would be up to two such subsequent deliveries from the insect cache.

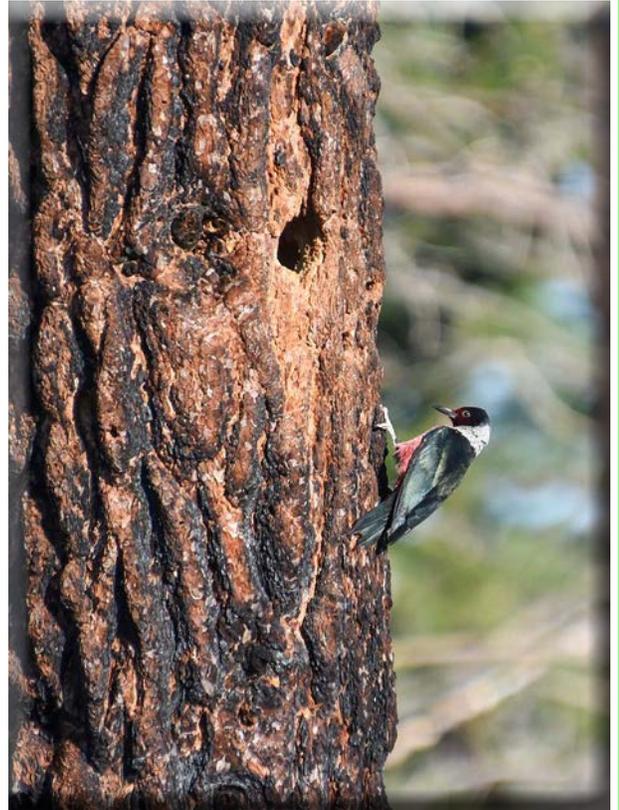


Photo - Lucia Gonzalez

This leads to another surprising action on the adult's part. When it comes out of the nest headfirst to pick up cached food it is face-down, but needs to turn 180 degrees so that it is placed in the normal vertical position on the bark. So as it exits it does a sort of dance step - almost a somersault - to get in that position. I noticed too that while in most cases departures from the cavity to go find more food were normal clean flight like other woodpeckers, yet occasionally the adult would perform that curious somersault and quickly fly off. That seemed to coincide with the direction of flight being behind the cavity; that is, if the cavity was in the north face of the snag (as is this one) the bird wanted to fly south and the somersault start seemed to be the chosen way to start, perhaps more efficient or quicker.

I returned to observe the behaviors when the young were about 14 days old; by then they didn't need pulverized food and so the adults entered the cavity directly to deliver to them. No more anvil and granary activities. The young will fledge at about 4 weeks old, showing themselves at the cavity entrance in just the last few days as they await food deliveries. The young - maybe 5 or more - will all fledge over a day or two, probably staying on or around the nest tree for a few days, but not re-entering the nest cavity again. They will be clumsy flycatchers for a while but, by early September will be as accomplished as their parents.

Barry Boulton

SIGHTINGS & OBSERVATIONS

June 6

Again this year, John & Sandi Turner are hosting a family of Barn Owls in their garage. Previously the nest has held over 10 young, but this year it's just 5. As John said "Sandi and I checked the box after sunset. I was very surprised - the faces only a mother could love! They won't fledge for at least a week or so as some still have their baby fuzzies".



Photo - John Turner

June 26

Rose-breasted Grosbeak -- Sandi happened to see the bird on branch beside the seed feeder. I confirmed the sighting of a male with beautiful plumage with this photo.



Photo - John Turner

Editor's Note:

According to "Birds of the Sierra Nevada" by Tweedy and Pandolfino: "Breeds across Canada and the eastern US, and is an uncommon spring and fall migrant in the western states, with multiple records every year in the Sierra. It is attracted to feeders (like John & Sandi's) where many observations are made".

June 20

I sometimes see Bullock's Orioles down here in Valley Springs (although they are shy and usually high up in the oak trees), but last week I spotted a different black and orange/yellow bird in my bird bath around 7:30 p.m. It turned out to be a Hooded Oriole - I am honored to have such an unusual and glamorous avian visitor! It turns out that this species is slowly expanding its range, so I'll look for it in future years.

Colleen Platt, Valley Springs

Editor's Note:

According to "Birds of the Sierra Nevada" by Tweedy and Pandolfino: "Prior to the arrival of Europeans, Hooded Orioles were restricted to nesting in riparian trees in desert oases of the Southwest and Mexico. However, they have great fondness for planted palms and have extended their range in southern and coastal California and more recently into lower Sierra elevations with the widespread planting of Washingtonia and other ornamental palms". They continue - West Side: "Uncommon and very localized early April through mid-September in the Foothill zone, where scattered pairs nest up to 2,500 ft. Recent breeding locations include the western-most edges of Nevada and El Dorado counties, Auburn and above Lake Don Pedro".

June 27

Along highway 49 just north of Angel's Camp, and just behind the new Humane Society building and Spence's Feedlot, there's a smallish pond with an Osprey platform at the back.

This year, just like several years past, a pair of Ospreys is rearing a family in their nest on that platform. Today, as I went to pick up another batch of fast-disappearing bird food, I paused to view the nest with its two juveniles; to my great surprise, I saw the female take off from the nest, fly to a nearby tree where she picked up what appeared to be cached food of some sort, and carried it back to the nest for the juveniles to pick apart and eat.

I have never observed, read or heard of, such caching behavior by Ospreys and am wondering if others have any thoughts or observations along these lines?

John Sutake, Arnold

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FIELD TRIP REPORTS

Fahey Meadow – June 11

For this outing I thought I would introduce a new locale. There were 8 of us to explore this new venue. Everyone seemed to enjoy learning about a new Birding spot. Highlights of the day included Yellow Warblers, Green-tailed Towhees, Calliope Hummingbird, Dusky Flycatchers and a Western Tanager. At our lunch spot we got to add a Hairy Woodpecker and an American Dipper. A lovely day. I hope to offer another visit to this unique area in the fall.



Yellow Warbler - Greg Robbins

Kit DeGear

Indigeny – June 23

For the end of the year trip, I was joined with one of my favorite birding couples, the McDows. A very warm day but nice, since we were rained out for our May outing. The highlight of the day was a young Great Horned Owl spotted by Barbara. I have heard one here before but this was my first sighting at Indigeny. We were also treated to an observation of the Orange-crowned Warbler and the continued presence of the Bullock's Oriole. Hope to see some of you next September when we resume our monthly visits!

Kit DeGear

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JULY FIELD TRIPS

Our only formal field trip in July is this one at GCSD because we take a summer break.

July 3 (Wednesday) - 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 July 3. The property encompasses an area of more than 200 acres of oak, pine and willow habitat with three water storage ponds.

On the June 5 Bird Walk, birders saw 37 species including first of the season Western Wood-Pewees and four species of swallows - Violet-green, Barn, Cliff and Northern Rough-winged. A Gray Fox with three young was 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.

Jeanne Ridgley (209)962-7598

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New Melones Osprey Survey Results - June 8



Osprey photo - Pat Sanders

Several CSAS members participated in the annual Osprey count organized by Pat Sanders at New Melones Lake who says:

Thank you for helping out with our annual Osprey survey on June 8, 2019. The weather was absolutely perfect in the mid 80's and 53 different species of birds were counted.

A total of 24 Osprey (22 adults/2 fledglings), 29 Bald Eagles (16 Adults, 5 immature and 8 fledglings) were counted during the survey. There was a special bald eagle nest with 3 eaglets, all healthy and ready to fledge. A Canada gosling was rescued the day of the survey and released a week later after Tri-County treated him/her for an eye infection in both eyes. A very happy ending.

Many other bird species were sighted including: Great Blue Herons, Western Grebes, Common Mergansers, Canada Geese with lots of babies, Red-tailed Hawks, a variety of Swallows, Kestrels, Western Kingbirds and two Spotted Sandpipers. Studies show species diversity is a good indicator of the health of an aquatic ecosystem.

Sincerely,
Pat Sanders

Natural Resource Ranger, New Melones Lake

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(Some of the) Birds Breeding in Big Trees State Park

Narrative & photos by **Alan Beymer**

The Usual Suspects and a Couple of Surprises...

The bird mating season is well underway at Calaveras Big Trees after a slow start. I kept an eye primarily on the Stanislaus River where the Smith Parkway crosses. I expected a 2019 batch of **Canyon Wren** fledglings by now.

But the male wren which was looking for a mate in late April is still singing solo, apparently hoping to make a connection, even late in the season. Did the extended winter weather slow down bird mating? I'm not sure, but the Smith Parkway bridge also lacks the regular pair of Black Phoebes which usually nest under the roadway.



However, a pair of **American Dippers** cavorting at water's edge seem to be a couple, as well as two **Western Tanagers**.



New to me is the **Osprey** nest high above the Smith Parkway between the river crossing and the South Grove. Fish being transported to the nest definitely indicate family matters in progress.

Elsewhere in the park, reports of White-headed Woodpeckers nesting are abundant. And **Red-breasted Nuthatches** at the North Grove group campground and by the Visitor Center provided hours of entertainment.



Pine Mountain Lake Avian Activities

Dave Douglass goes out to shoot birds and wildlife around Pine Mountain Lake most days, and so here are some of his photos and observations during June.

This colorful male **Bullock's Oriole**, one of a nesting pair, keeps attacking itself in an outdoor mirror (apparently can't figure out the concept of the image being HIM). Nearby was an **Ash-throated Flycatcher** which I never have up here.

I was out shooting our local Bald Eagles this morning and didn't notice it but when I got home and took a closer look at some shots of one of the two that were down there, I couldn't help but notice that it looks like its left wing has gotten bitten or otherwise damaged. However, it didn't seem to hamper its flying ability.



A flock of seven **Black-headed Stilts** was on Pine Mountain Lake on the morning of June 12th. They are the first ones I've ever seen up here. They did not nest this year but continue to hang around the lake.



Central Sierra Audubon Society - CSAS

(Chapter of the National Audubon Society)

P.O. Box 3047, Sonora, CA 95370

General Meetings:

Tuolumne County

Third Wednesday at 6:30pm (except July, August, and December), in the Tuolumne Public Library on Greenley Road, Sonora.

Calaveras County

Various locations and days as advertised in the Squawker.

Board Meetings: Please call Barry Boulton (209)596-0612.

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/

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