

Central Sierra Audubon Society

Sierra Squawker



www.centralsierraudubon.org

February - 2020

FEBRUARY PUBLIC PROGRAMS

TUOLUMNE COUNTY

Birding in Australia by Steven Umland

Steven will tell us the stories of his recent adventures in Australia, albeit prior to the disastrous wildfires, along with photos of the birds and mammals that he enjoyed during the trip. Australia is, as we know, a land of unique wildlife, with almost half of the bird species being endemic to the continent.

Steven is a long-time CSAS member taking on several important roles, including that of organizer and compiler of the Groveland and Sonora Christmas Bird Counts (reports inside this newsletter). He is quite an owl expert, so time will tell if Australian owls show up in this presentation!

Wednesday, February 19 at 6:30pm
at the County Library on Greenley Road

CALAVERAS COUNTY

Owens Lake – Tundra to the Tropics by Rich Cimino of Yellowbilled Tours

The importance of Owens Lake to birds of the Pacific Flyway has become abundantly clear as they have very quickly begun to return now that LA's Dept. of Water Resources is forced to allow some level of water in the lake. Rich will speak to the history and significance of the lake and, of course, to the birds themselves.

Rich gave this impressive keynote presentation at the Owens Lake Bird Festival in 2019. He is owner of Yellowbilled tours which offers guided bird trips to several countries.

Tuesday, February 18 at 6pm
Murphys Diggins, Tom Bell Road, Murphys

Note: the gate will be open from 5:45pm

A Conservation Project for CSAS

Knowing how CSAS and we as individuals can respond to declining bird populations is a big question that seems almost impossible to answer; yet I believe it is possible as you will see here, and I invite you to join me. We have a locally reasonably abundant species that appears to be doing well, but we don't know how resilient it will be in future years; I speak of the **Osprey**. To ensure the species resiliency, we need first to understand where they refuel on their migratory journeys and where they stay over winter (probably mostly Mexico) until ready to return here to breed. We also need to know where and how the ready-to-breed youngsters choose breeding locations on their return so that we can ensure the availability of suitable habitats and features. The quality and maintenance of those habitats at both ends and during migration will determine the species future - but, first, we need to know where they are located.

Within the next 3 years, I want to find a way of placing satellite telemetry transmitters on all fledgling Ospreys in a nest with 3 or more healthy youngsters. Depending on how long the transmitters work, we would learn about their migrations to and from (probably) Mexico, and where they reside at each end and in between during their journeys. This is obviously an ambitious and expensive scheme for which outside funding would be required. That funding right now would be quite impossible, and so I intend to do a scientific study of all Osprey nests in our Audubon region of Calaveras and Tuolumne Counties. If we demonstrate serious intent, it increases our chances of being taken seriously and funded.

This study means compiling a database showing:

- Locations of all active Osprey nests in Calaveras & Tuolumne Counties,
- Date when the pair returns after winter to prepare the nest for breeding (usually late-Feb to mid-March),
- Date when the female begins to incubate the eggs (when incubating, she's in the nest almost 100% of the time so it's easy to know when egg-laying begins),
- Date when and how many young heads appear (it would be nice to count the number of eggs, but since most Osprey nests are way above our heads, that's not possible, so we must go by little head count).
- Number of active and healthy young (not all eggs produce viable chicks),
- Date when each sibling departs the nest (they do that sequentially, and often a "runt" or weaker sibling takes up to a month to follow its fellow siblings out of the nest),
- Date when the family have all migrated for the winter (usually around end of August).

Here's what I would like to request of you:

1. **CRITICAL:** please tell me the locations of any active Osprey nests that you know. They won't be active until late February through mid-March but we can assume that any nest that was active in 2019 is likely to be active this year too. That will be a good starting place.

2. If you're willing to keep an eye on any specific nest to give me the data shown in the previous list, that would be great. If that would be possible, I can provide you with an approximate schedule of events that tells you when to spend a little time observing the nest to obtain the data that I require.

If you're able to give me nesting locations but not do any follow-up work, that will still be good for me because I'll schedule the follow-ups myself. The important thing right now is to get the basic data - nest locations - and begin a scientific database. Actually, I already have my own database of about 15 nests, but I need your data to complete it.

Here are some actions I will take that mesh with this program

I shall be hosting morning sessions at the New Melones Visitor Center along highway 49 on the Tuolumne side of the river to observe the Osprey nest adjacent to the center. These sessions will be timed to observe specific situations at the nest such as female brooding and (if we're lucky) male bringing her a fish to eat; youngsters in the nest waiting for Dad to bring fish which Mother will tear off for them; siblings growing fast and preparing to depart the nest, etc. This will be an educational event and I'm hoping to attract students to participate to learn some very specific bird ecology.

If you can provide nest site data, and help in any way described, please email: rbarryboulton@gmail.com

Thanks, **Barry Boulton**

Quick Action - now please!

As you probably know, the **Migratory Bird Treaty Act** of 1918 has been critical for saving bird species over the past 100+ years, and you may know that the Trump Administration recently issued a **legal opinion** which effectively nullifies that legislation. Now, under direction from the Administration, the US Fish & Wildlife Service is preparing a **new regulation** that will justify and enshrine that opinion. This is a critical step because a regulation has much more impact as the courts are more likely to defer to the Administration under a regulation that has gone through "due process" than with only an opinion.

It is important that the FW&S hears from as many citizens as possible, and you can easily add your voice by using the Audubon Action alert at:

https://act.audubon.org/onlineactions/_g3AwivRA0CnotOktjzvPQ2?ms=policy-adv-email-ea-x-advocacy_20200130_mbt_a_alert&utm_source=ea&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=advocacy_20200130_mbt_a_alert&emci=ff803443-7b43-ea11-a1cc-00155d03b1e8&emdi=7f413cb3-a243-ea11-a1cc-00155d03b1e8&ceid=697478&contactdata=tpdpqqATlxJiIYC3UtHtzU%2f8njhzI44vk0SHn-01WHR%2fQppmZvsn5Ml3eROGL1XGXWIKlxJc3ChzgbPNseVHk%2fPx0cc1N9WxNLx34N18jdo%2fIZt%2fNzk7PNJiDdP7g-FZm3qUufl2r4egbPrpN0a7Xh2prhS406ejVqGKPA%2bQ9cupVKzcc7BUNYFEFYLE7JKADA4XEGIqVWo5ZzTiK7So5r0keb1z5eMC-Q5xGC0RXg8mr2u7dYTdvQ2e5JW0TPODwS

As you'll see when you log on, you simply sign up to use this *fastAction* system whereupon you can either use their already-prepared alert, or write your own version. In reality, numbers are all that count, so writing your own alert is probably not worth it when there will be tens of thousands of such comments. A great advantage to this *fastAction* system is that once you're signed up, you can receive alerts from Audubon that take a minimal amount of your time but in aggregate make a real difference.

Please send your comment today!

Climate Change & Avian Adaptation

Although climate change is clearly very important, birds can and do adapt to climate change as evidenced by the fact that most extant bird species have been in existence in their modern forms for several million years, over which time they've adapted and radiated through many environmental threats including the relatively modern ice ages. Indeed, it is likely that historical environmental stresses and avian responses with their abilities to fly, disperse and radiate are precisely the reasons that an astonishing ten thousand species of birds inhabit the planet.

I just participated in the Snow Goose Festival in Chico, California, where I learned of an amazing set of avian adaptations. The Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge complex is surrounded by many private gun clubs that threaten the over-wintering ducks and geese. Normally, as for instance at Merced NWR, these migratory birds seek overnight refuge on or in water, and then fly out to feed in the surrounding agricultural fields during the day; not so at this complex. Feeding on private lands around these refuges during daylight hunting hours is suicidal, so they have modified their usual foraging-roosting patterns by flying out at dusk to feed in the fields overnight, returning to the safety of refuge waters at dawn for daytime roosting and resting. I find it amazing and inspiring - even hopeful - that these several species of over-wintering birds have demonstrated their abilities to completely reverse long-time historical daytime and nighttime patterns through their adaptive skills.

What's clear is that birds' ability to adapt is not in question; rather, reduced opportunities for adaptation is the fundamental problem that we must address and solve because they are specifically human-caused problems. Currently, human activities that kill birds are increasing and totally independent of climate change; tackling just climate change doesn't necessarily help bird survival. In fact, the current emphasis at the political level in resisting climate change is focused completely on perceived human needs and is likely to prove catastrophic for wildlife (I can discuss that possibly controversial statement in a later issue of the Squawker with response letters if there's a desire on your part as members to engage in that - so let me know if you wish).

We can reasonably assume that birds will repeat the ability to adapt again and again through climate change as they have always done, provided that we give them the chance, the space, the resources. That's why I want to research and understand the Osprey's survival requirements; this one thing we can do - save the world we cannot.

Barry Boulton

JANUARY FIELD TRIPS

February 5 (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 Feb 5. The property encompasses an area of more than 200 acres of oak, pine and willow habitat with three water storage ponds.

On the Jan 2 Bird Walk, we saw 14 species. Highlight was a flock of 70 Band-tailed Pigeons flying and perching in trees.

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

February 8 (Saturday) - Stevenot Winery

This is a new field trip (not in the tasting room which comes later if you wish!), but along San Domingo Road just outside Murphys among the vineyards.

Take Sheep Ranch Road from Murphys Main Street (opposite the old Murphys Hotel) and travel 2.1 miles almost (but not quite) to San Domingo Creek at the very bottom. San Domingo Road is a demure little turning on the left, so turn in and park on the right in the clearing about 200 yards in. **We'll meet there at 9am.** BTW, Sheep Ranch Road for that 2.1 miles is very bumpy and winding, so take your time and if you're a little late, just park and walk down the road; it's very obvious. This road has zero traffic so it's very relaxed birding.

Barry Boulton (209)596-0612

February 15 (Saturday) - Salt Springs Valley

This is one of our favorite field trips in Calaveras County with a variety of habitats including ponds, grasslands and oak woodlands. On our last trip we saw 49 species including a Burrowing Owl, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Mute Swans, Bald Eagles and Lewis's Woodpeckers.

As usual, our trip leader will be Paolo Maffei. Meet at 8:15am at Barron's (formerly Perko's) to carpool from Sonora, or at 9am opposite the pond about 1/4 mile along Rock Creek Road off highway 4 near Copperopolis. Bring water, lunch and radios (for convoying) if you have them. Lunch at the resort (\$10 per car). Finish by 2pm - but if you need to depart earlier, we'll get to the resort around 11:30am. Rain will cancel the trip.

Paolo Maffei (209)532-8426

February 23 (Sunday) - Indigeny Reserve

Please join me as we bird through the beautiful grounds at Indigeny. Besides the apple orchards, there are large oaks, some pines, stream-side thickets and a marshy area with reeds that provide some great habitats for birds. As always, bring your binoculars and/or scopes, wear muted colors and you may wish to include a hat, sunscreen and water.

On the January 26 walk, three of us were optimistic enough to meet at Indigeny in the hopes the rain would subside. Unfortunately, it was clear that was not going to happen soon. Violet from Twain Harte, new to Audubon outings, suggested going out to breakfast. as an excellent way to bide some time for better weather. After a very nice breakfast at Barrow's, formerly Perko's, we returned to Indigeny. While the bird species count was not particularly high, 23 species, we were still pleased to see as many birds as we did given the still drippy morning. Highlights included tracking down a very vocal but secretive Bewick's Wren and a brief sighting of a Great Horned Owl whose faint hoots I had heard earlier. It was, also, nice to see the enjoyment of a fellow birder over some of the beautiful birds we often take for granted like the California Scrub Jay or the Spotted Towhee.

The walk will last 2-3 hrs. Children are welcome! Meet in the parking lot at 8:00 AM. Rain will cancel the trip. Follow the signs from the intersection of Greenley and Lyons/Bald Mountain Roads in Sonora. After a few miles on Lyons/Bald Mountain Road, turn right onto Apple Hill Drive where there is a large sign that says "Apple Valley Ranches." A quick left turn onto Summers Lane leads you to Indigeny.

Kit DeGear (925) 822-5215 or kdegear@gmail.com

February 26 (Wednesday) - Merced NWR

This is our annual trip to the refuge as the cranes, ducks and geese are preparing to return to their northern breeding grounds. This is a good time to visit because the birds are fattening themselves in preparation for their grueling journey, feeding on corn grown at the refuge, so some may be observable on the refuge during daytime, while others will give us that spectacular sunset fly-in. In addition, we usually have surprising and enchanting sightings of the less common and iconic waterbirds - maybe a bittern?

We will meet just inside the refuge along Sandy Mush Road south of Merced at the first overlook platform at 2pm (see map at www.centralsierraudubon.org). Meet at Barron's in Sonora (formerly Perko's) at 12:15pm if you wish to carpool. If considering carpooling, note that we will stay for dinner at the excellent Thai Star in Merced.

Barry Boulton (209)596-061

Note that maps for all field trips are shown on our website at centralsierraudubon.org

JANUARY SIGHTINGS

January in Arnold by John Sutake, 4000ft.

Jan. 21

We were able to watch this male Northern Flicker as it lingered by the roadside at Willow Springs housing development (3,000') in Soulsbyville.



Photo by Greg Robbins

Jean Dakota

Editor's note: that this is a male is shown by the "malar" stripe or mustache at the base of its bill. It's most likely a 1st year bird because it was sufficiently naive to allow Jean & Greg to spend time very close to it, and the red wash on the crown of the head is brighter than for an average adult.

Jan. 22

I'm still a little peeved that squirrels have commandeered my new Screech Owl box. I am reminded that I am not in charge...

I went over to a pal's deck this morning to shoot their birds, then I went down the hill in search of my current favorite hawk, the Ferruginous.



Dave Douglass, Pine Mountain Lake, 2,800 ft.

We continue to have fewer birds in Arnold than normal, certainly over-wintering ones. An exception was the one-day presence of seven American Wigeons, but they were migrating through from the Great Basin to the coast, not planning to stay here. Although they prefer to eat aquatic plants (often robbed from diving ducks such as Coots when the coots surface with the underwater vegetation), these were just skimming the surface of White Pines Lake on which the only food present were thousands of floating alder seeds. This shows a certain flexibility in diet that reminds me of the snorkeling or near-surface foraging, of Common Mergansers who normally dive to obtain their food and who visit this lake occasionally. This month they were joined by seven Ring-necked Ducks who also dive for their food.

Also present here this month have been Common Goldeneyes, Buffleheads, Hooded Mergansers and one Eared Grebe. On land, I'm still enjoying occasional visits by the over-wintering Townsend's Warbler - that "should" no longer be here according to the books - visiting my bird bath, along with the resident Golden-crowned Kinglet, Spotted Towhee and lots of Juncos.

Eagle Count on New Melones Lake

Several CSAS members joined the Bureau of Reclamation's Eagle Count early January that was organized by Ranger Pat Sanders who many of us know well and respect. Here's her letter of thanks to all participants:

Dear Eagle Count Participants,

Thank you for assisting with the Annual New Melones Eagle Survey on January 4, 2020.

A total of 18 Bald Eagles were counted during the survey and unfortunately no Golden Eagles were observed. In 2019, 12 Bald Eagles were observed and no Golden Eagles. In 2018, 20 Bald Eagles observed along with 5 Golden Eagles.

Thirty-nine species of birds were sighted including: Osprey, Doves, Great Blue Herons, Woodpeckers, a variety of Grebes, Kingfishers, Steller's Jay, Common Mergansers, Red Tailed, Coopers and Sharp-shinned Hawks and American Kestrels. We seem to have a very healthy community of Kingfishers this year at 15 observed. There was only 1 counted in 2019. Studies show species diversity is a good indicator of the health of an aquatic ecosystem.

I want to thank all the volunteers who participated in the 2020 Annual Eagle Survey here at New Melones Lake and a special thank you to the boat captains who graciously provided their time and expertise for this survey.

Sincerely,

Patricia Sanders

Natural Resource Park Ranger, New Melones Lake

2019 Christmas Bird Count Reports

Sonora CBC

December 14 dawned overcast and cold. During the day, 39 people scoured 177 square miles of Tuolumne County to find 7,320 birds of 96 species. This was the second lowest individual count number we have seen in the past years. Overall, the wet fall weather contributed to a good showing of water birds. Those showing their highest numbers of the past ten years were Mallard, Green-winged Teal, Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, and Double-crested Cormorant. A first for the Count were two Sora at the golf course. Land birds that enjoyed their highest numbers were Say's Phoebe, Common Raven, Varied Thrush (50 of them!), American Pipit (50!), and Purple Finch. Besides the Sora, sightings of a White-headed Woodpecker, 3 Northern Harriers, and a White-throated Sparrow were great finds.

On the down side, the following experienced their lowest numbers in the past ten years - Common Goldeneye, Rock Pigeon (yay!), California Scrub-Jay, American Robin, Cedar Waxwing (plenty of food out there), Dark-eyed Junco, Golden-crowned Sparrow, and Spotted Towhee. The number of Juncos and Golden-crowned Sparrows were less than half of their previous lows.

It is so hard to figure out why we had such low numbers this year. There appeared to be a lot of food available. There were plenty of berries for the Robins and Waxwings. I saw an abundance of seed plants for the finches and sparrows. There is not an appreciable decrease in available habitat. I have not heard of any mysterious population crashes in the breeding areas of our winter migrants. To top it off, it was a great day to count birds. So, are we just seeing an overall decline in numbers? Do we need to be more diligent in the field? Is this just a glitch and we will see a totally different Count next year? It is hard to say. Let us see how we fare next year.

Mark your calendars: this year's Sonora count will be on Saturday, December 19, 2020.

Steven Umland

Groveland CBC

Thirteen of us went out on Monday, December 16 to count 3,613 birds of 77 species. I always like to start with those species that showed their highest numbers, so here goes --> Canada Goose (288), Green-winged Teal (7), Ruddy Duck (71), Red-shouldered Hawk (16), American Coot (135), Mourning Dove (35), White-breasted Nuthatch (34), Yellow-rumped Warbler (15), Dark-eyed Junco (584), and Spotted Towhee (123).

On the flip side, the lowest number in the past few years went to Wild Turkey (7), Collared Dove (16), Nuttall's Woodpecker (6), Black Phoebe (8), Say's Phoebe (0!), Hermit Thrush (5), California Towhee (29) and only 1 Western Meadowlark (!).

The totals we see here do not vary a lot, relatively, from year to year. Since we have so few people out in the field, the total number will always be lower. The number of any individuals will be at the whim of us being in the right place at the right time. For example, a flock of Lawrence's Goldfinches move around from day to day. If more people are in the field, the chances of seeing that flock increases greatly. This may also explain ANY yearly fluctuation we see in ANY species.

I want to thank all of the participants, from the past to the present, for all the hard work you put in to this count. It is always a bit colder up here and there have historically been fewer birds to keep us going. That being said, this was the final Groveland Count that I will compile. I apologize to all of you who look forward to our day in December, but it is time for me to say goodbye. I sincerely hope that someone will step in to take over the helm.

Steven Umland

Calaveras CBC

Our count day, Saturday December 28, was a beautiful birding day, and across the whole circle we observed some 82 species, including two Long-eared Owls and a Bald Eagle, and a few shorebirds such as the Common Golden Eye, and Bufflehead. We also saw many of the usual species, but nothing outstanding. Thanks to all the counters who make this annual event happen.

Sandra Maurer

Narrative & Photos by Maggie Sanchez of Columbia College

American White Pelican (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*)

On my trip up to Arcata a few weeks ago, I ran into this large group of White Pelicans at Clear Lake. They were very entertaining, especially when trying to fish. They'd be floating around and then suddenly they would all lunge into the water in unison. But I did not see much success result from this tactic. They also always look so elegant when coming into land; almost like they are skiing right onto the water.

Editor's note: the pelican in the foreground has a raised bridge on its bill which is a courting symbol - apparently the females like it! Although it seems a little early for courting behavior, that bridge is caused by sexually-stimulated hormonal flows in the male, so we're seeing it in the early stages of the breeding cycle.



Sandhill Crane (*Grus tabida*)

On my way home from Arcata, I decided to take the old Highway 5 that runs along the Sacramento river in hopes of seeing some wildlife. Fortunately, this guy was walking along the muddy cow paddies and stayed still long enough that I could get a nice sunset-lit shot.

Editor's note: this is probably a Greater Sandhill judging by the bill length which is longer than the head from back to bill base, whereas the Lesser's is chunkier and shorter.



Central Sierra Audubon Society - CSAS

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

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

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.centralsierraaudubon.org/join-us/

Your CSAS Officers

Barry Boulton, President	(209)596-0612
Tom Parrington, Conservation	(209)928-3835
Ralph Retherford, VP Programs	(209)770-6124
Jean Dakota, Secretary	(209)591-9952
Linda Millspaugh, Treasurer	(209)586-9557
Kit DeGear, Field Trips	(925)822-5215
OPEN , Membership	(209)586-2169
Jan Jorn-Baird, Publicity	(209)532-1106
Gail Witzlsteiner, Education	(209)586-4025
Barry Boulton, Newsletter Editor	(209)596-0612

Your CSAS Committee Chairs

Gail Witzlsteiner, Bird Box Trail	(209)586-4025
Tom Harrington, Book/Bird Box Sales	(209)694-8564
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