

Central Sierra Audubon Society

# Sierra Squawker



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

March - 2020

## MARCH PUBLIC PROGRAMS

### TUOLUMNE COUNTY

#### **Waterfowl Conservation on the West Coast: What we Know, What we Don't and How we Learn**

**by Rob Blenk**

Rob Blenk is a PhD Candidate at UC Davis' Graduate Group in Ecology. Rob's current work addresses winter conservation and foraging among waterfowl, but his research history spans a broad variety of birds and ecosystems including Laysan Albatross in Hawaii, Atlantic Puffins in the UK, Great-winged Petrels in New Zealand, and many others. Rob completed his undergraduate work at Oregon State University where he developed his enduring interest in the energetic budgets and foraging ecology of birds. Outside of research, Rob enjoys participating in a variety of scientific outreach programs and is - of course - an avid birder.



**Wednesday, March 18 at 6:30pm  
at the Sonora County Library on Greenley Road**

---

### CALAVERAS COUNTY

#### **Osprey Breeding Behaviors**

**by Barry Boulton, Central Sierra Audubon President**

Ospreys are unique in the world of birds in that they allow humans to get remarkably close, and that allows us to watch them more intimately than any other bird. This is the time when they are returning to nest and breed here, so there are opportunities to enjoy watching them. I will show and explain video sequences of their behaviors, including current local pairs such as the pair at Wallace that have just begun egg-laying and incubation.

**Thursday, March 19 at 6pm  
Round Table Pizza in Valley Springs**

OSPREY PROJECT UPDATE

Well, with location input from several of you, I have a preliminary database of 26 nests excluding the Pinescrest area where there are over a dozen nest sites from previous years, many of which are no longer active. Very soon I'll be spending time up there to find out which are active. I expect to end up with perhaps a total of 30 active nests across our two counties over the coming breeding season. If we assume an average fledging rate of 1.5 per active nest (which is probably low), that means 45 juveniles will head off down to Mexico or beyond in the August-September timeframe. If we assume a 50% male/female ratio, that should mean up to 22 males returning to our two counties in two years time looking for a nesting site to attract a female partner (juveniles spend their first full year in the over-wintering grounds and then migrate up here to breed when they're just two years old). Accepted wisdom is that male juveniles return to their natal area to breed while female juveniles disperse to find a mate. In this way, they optimize survival health through mixing and blending DNA over different families - not that they do it deliberately of course, but, rather, those who practised this procedure had higher survival and reproduction rates than those families where each member came back to the same region and practised in-breeding with its deleterious mutations.

Of course, that number of potential returning first-time breeders raises some interesting questions given that the number of nests and breeding pairs in our two counties is not greatly increasing - if at all - every year. How many are actually returning? If they didn't return here, why? Did they die in their maturing location? Where do they search for nesting sites when they return to breed? Do unmated males really return to their natal grounds? What do they do when they can't find a suitable nest location? Should we be providing more poles/platforms? Those are the types of questions that this project is intended to answer over a few years.

Meanwhile, Ospreys are slowly returning here to breed; the first one seen on a nest was on January 29 which is very early and probably speaks to our mild winter. That first pair are well on their way in their relationship and have just commenced egg-laying and incubation. I was lucky a few days ago to see an example of their bonding behavior; the female was sitting on the nest when I arrived and then she flew away. I just had time to walk over to the pole, record its position on my cellphone gps and get back to my car when she returned to the nest. Right behind her was the male, bringing a partially-eaten fish for her. He dropped it in the nest and she immediately picked it up and flew off to a nearby perch to eat it. Both of these actions are shown in these photos. During 45 days or so of incubation, the female will be almost 100% of the time on the nest, breaking away only to eat the fish that the male always provides, and to relieve herself. This is a very sedentary process for the female who flies very little during those many weeks, and this allows her to begin molting before the male who now has a strenuous period ahead of providing several fish per day when the youngsters hatch. The male usually eats the head of the fish (as these photos show) before he provides the body to her because the fish head is particularly rich in fats that gives him the energy and strength to provide meals for mother and young.



*Male brings the decapitated fish to the female. He is strengthening their pair bond, and confirming that he's a good food supplier - without that confirmation, she would not mate with him.*



*The female rarely if ever eats on the nest, even during egg incubation and while nurturing the young hatchlings. She takes her food to a nearby perch to eat at her leisure while the male takes over incubation or caring for the young.*

## MARCH FIELD TRIPS

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

On the Feb 5 walk, we saw 31 species. Highlights were Cooper's Hawk, Nuttall's Woodpecker, Cedar Waxwings, and Purple Finches.

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**

### March 21 (Saturday) - New Melones Lake

This will be our first field trip to New Melones, and we will have the great pleasure of having Ranger Pat Sanders as our guide. While we look for birds as is our habit, Pat will regale us with stories about the lake and its wildlife. It will be interesting and educational and you might want to invite any family youngsters to join us for this special trip. After the hike, we shall also take a look at Osprey nests that are active and close-up, good for photography.

Meet at 8:30am the Heron Point Trail parking lot which is at the far end of the **Tuttletown** area off highway 49. That is, once inside the Tuttletown gate, drive straight all the way to the far end to the parking lot. The trail loop is 2.7 miles and listed as moderate. Bring snacks water and sandwich if you want to stay through lunch. We will receive free day passes for this event, so please let me know if you plan to participate so that I can tell you the procedure.

**Barry Boulton (rbarryboulton@gmail.com)**

### March 22 (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 Feb. 23rd. walk, the recent write up in the Union Democrat's Weekender and our own Squawker netted us 5 new birders to this location and so ten of us enjoyed a total of 33 species. The highlights were a Hairy Woodpecker (occa-

sionally seen in the past) which is unusual for this elevation but seems to like to hang out at Indigeny. There was also a brief sighting of a Cooper's Hawk, a Bewick's and a Marsh Wren.



Sal Salerno and John Harris from Stanislaus Audubon joined Jan Jorn-Baird and I to continue on to another Birding area adjacent to Indigeny which includes a pond. We were on the hunt for a Red-naped Sapsucker. Alas, we were only treated to a beautiful Red-breasted Sapsucker. We did get a nice view of a Purple Finch, also, less common at this elevation, which appeared to have nesting material.

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**

### March 28 (Saturday) - String of Pearls Oakdale

We will start the trip at the Oakdale Recreation Area on the Stanislaus River. Last year an unprecedented assemblage of at least a dozen flitting Phainopeplas was the first highlight of the day. followed by Cedar Waxwings and a freshwater turtle.

Meet 8:30am at Barrow's (previously Perko's) in Sonora to carpool. This will be a 100 mile round trip from Sonora so have enough gas! Bring layered clothing in muted colors, binoculars and scopes and lunch. If you wish to meet at Oakdale, the recreation area is just off River Road in Oakdale. That is, turn right at the traffic lights in Oakdale and then turn left on River Road. The 2nd left, Liberini Ave, takes you to the parking lot where we'll assemble there at 9:30am.

**Paolo Maffei (209)532-8426**

*Note that maps for all field trips are shown on our website at [centralsierraudubon.org](http://centralsierraudubon.org)*

## FEBRUARY SIGHTINGS

**Feb. 10**

Here's a shot I managed to get of a male and female Northern Harrier down at the San Luis Refuge. Alas, this was not a perfect photo but it has some action I have not seen plus, for some reason, the male (nicknamed "Gray Ghosts") is rarely seen. My sightings of this species are almost always the brown females so this shot is kinda extra to me.

**Dave Douglass**



### *Editor's note:*

This is the elegant and fast-moving aerial courtship dance that they do as part of their pair-bonding. The male may transfer food to his partner to demonstrate his fitness.

Yes the male "Gray Ghost" is not often seen and I've often wondered about that. I think that a major component is that the juvenile males look very much like the female in their first year and with some brownish coloring even in the second year. So if we assume two fledglings per year, the ratio of "females" to males will generally be about three to one.

In their book "Birds of the Sierra Nevada", Pandolfino & Beedy say that "some male harriers maintain harems of two to five females, a rare behavior in raptors". In those cases, the ratio of what looks like females to males will be even higher.

**Feb. 18th**

While looking out my living room window, I noticed several large white birds flying over Phoenix Lake with black in their wingtips. I jumped up and grabbed my binoculars and

ran out on our deck for a better look. At first I was thinking maybe Snow Geese. Once I got my binos on them I could see the very distinctive bill of the American White Pelican. No mistaking that bird! They banked and came back around to land in the lake. I could see that there were seven. I jumped in my car to make the short 1/4 mile drive down to the open shore; they were huddled up together by the little island and next to several Double-crested Cormorants who appeared to take no notice.

**Kit DeGear - Phoenix Lake, Sonora**

**Feb. 18th**

I've just been enjoying a large flock of thirty or more Cedar Waxwings feeding on the blue berries from the privet trees in my back yard. The Robins were coming through at the same time and so occasionally there was competition. Then of course, they left a delightful blue patina on my walkways; even so, well worthwhile to see these beautiful birds up close.

**Ralph Retherford Sonora**

**Feb. 22**

We had two young Waxwings who stayed only a minute in our backyard, and we hoped they would return the next day but, it was it was not to be. However, a Yellow Warbler was an unexpected surprise this early in the year. A Coopers Hawk cleared the yard, and didn't stay long either. Purple Finches are new here, and enjoy the feeders.



**George Dondero, Murphys**

## Winter 2019/20

For the past 10 years I have been keeping track of the different birds migrating through my area. We have native Toyon berries on our property and I also put out tube feeders with black oil sunflower seeds, Niger seed socks and suet blocks along with multiple water sources. So far this winter I have seen 18 different migration birds. Here are just a few: White-crown Sparrow, Savanna Sparrow, Yellow-rump Warbler, Cedar Waxwing, Golden-crowned Sparrow, Pine Siskin and Hermit Thrush.

**Dave McCrea, Cuesta Serena area, Sonora, 1,900 ft.**

## FEBRUARY FIELD TRIP REPORTS

### Feb. 8 - Stevenot Winery Murphys

Our first field trip to the old Stevenot Winery on San Domingo Road in beautiful weather yielded a total of 33 species with the highlight being an elusive California Thrasher.

**Barry Boulton**



### Feb. 15 - Salt Springs Valley

Another unseasonable but beautiful day found us at the Copperopolis pond, scoping mystery birds that revealed themselves as Eurasian collared doves, not the hoped for Belted Kingfishers. Moving on, the first of five Ferruginous Hawks flew in and settled in the grass. At the lake, a mature Bald Eagle remained perched for most of the morning. Lewis's woodpeckers appeared as expected, although in fewer numbers than at our last visit. Turning into the boat launch facility, a Rock Wren surprised us, skittering along the roof. *"That's my buddy, he hangs around all the time"* commented the attendant, but the bird, a highlight for us, did not reappear, not even in the rocks along the dam. Three Say's Phoebes, Pelicans and diverse ducks were among the 56 total species seen.

**Paolo Maffei**

### Feb. 26 - Merced NWR

This refuge always has such a rich variety of birds that even when the display of the iconic Sandhill Cranes isn't outstanding, you barely notice it. As it happens, most of the cranes were already on the refuge when we arrived at 2pm so, come a very modest sunset, there was no crane fly-in.

Despite the lack of crane activity, there were thousands of Snow and Ross's Geese with several dark or "blue" morphs, along with several hundred Greater White-fronted Geese that are all very close to migration time, so the energy and excitement they show is staggering, and when they spontaneously take off, the intensity of their calls plus beating wings is extreme.

On arrival, immediately inside the gate, a Great Horned Owl was sitting on its nest, probably already incubating eggs as this species is an early breeder. At the first overlook platform, a Sora was feeding in the open, a fairly unusual occurrence, and later we heard a Virginia Rail.

Several Wilson's Snipe were foraging close to the road, quite oblivious to our cars. Very interesting that this was once a much-hunted delicacy during Gold Rush days, so shy that hunting it was a dedicated solo activity that gave rise to the name "sniper" for an outstanding and patient marksman. Now, when I visit the refuge, I always see snipe within feet of the car and without camouflaging vegetation. It speaks to the adaptability of birds; it would be wasteful for snipe in this refuge to waste energy hiding now that there's no danger.

The Common Yellowthroat pair at the final overlook was a delight, as was the Burrowing Owl peeking its head just above the grass, but the highlight was a vagrant female Vermilion Flycatcher that Sal Salerno knew about and led us to view. It was not much bothered by our presence within a few feet, and gave us good photo ops as you see here.

**Barry Boulton**



*Female Vermilion Flycatcher - George Dondero*

# The Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) North Grove Meadow at Calaveras Big Trees

**Introduction.** Each and every year National Audubon asks us, the membership, to participate in what they call the Great Backyard Bird Count or GBBC. Here's how Audubon describes it: "*spend as little as 15 minutes on one or more days of the count tallying birds in your community, and then submit your lists online. The data collected by volunteers from around the world powers conservation initiatives and helps us better understand how climate change will impact the birds we all love*".

Oddly enough, I don't recall anyone in CSAS participating in this program previously, so I was absolutely delighted when Alan Beymer informed me that he and Claudia planned to do it, so here's his account - and I hope more of us join him next year.

February 15 was a wonderful morning to be outside counting birds. Claudia and I counted 10 recorded 10 species and 21 total birds in or near the meadow at Calaveras Big Trees. We had never participated in a bird count before, so were a bit apprehensive, but the Audubon/Cornell folks provided good instructions.

The meadow was active and noisy when we arrived at 10 a.m. Dominant in numbers and volume were the Stellar Jays; seven birds total. Three Ruby-crowned Kinglets flitted within the willows. Duos were provided by Common Ravens, Red-breasted Nuthatches, and Black hoebes. These were not necessarily couples, but I suspect the phoebes were mates. Birds represented by single participants were: Pacific Wren, Mountain Chickadee, White-headed Woodpecker, Pileated Woodpecker, and Sharp-shinned Hawk. The hawk stole the show, visually. Though we did not make a connection at the time, later when we talked over the trip, it seemed that when the hawk arrived, the smaller birds disappeared.

Alan Beymer



*Photos by  
Alan Beymer*

---

## 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/](http://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
<b>OPEN</b> , 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
Chris Laddish, Scholarship	(209)728-3871
Barry Boulton, Website	(209)596-0612
Walt Kruse, YSS delegate	(707)548-1829
Chris Laddish, Calaveras County Contact	(209)728-3871