Central Sierra Audubon Society

Sierra Squawker

www.centralsierraaudubon.org

April - 2020

PUBLIC PROGRAMS & FIELD TRIPS CANCELED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE

Message from the CSAS President

Although it was pretty straightforward to cancel our public programs because of government mandates and common sense, we, the CSAS Board, found it more difficult to cancel field trips because social distance could, in principle be observed. But, we noticed that in practice, social distancing even in small numbers was quite cumbersome and difficult given that you want to stand at the same spot to see an elusive bird, or use a spotting scope that shouldn't be shared under the circumstances.

Therefore, we decided that, along with all other Audubon chapters, we must cancel field trips until the emergency is over and done with, and when field trips will constitute no threat to health. However, we recognize the desire of people to get outside the house and into the natural world as each of us does, and so we support that activity with the proviso of doing it alone or in household groups away from crowds. Up here in the Mother Lode, it is generally possible to do exactly that.

Given the need to avoid crowds, we cannot suggest specific locations that you might visit to view birds, but the good news is that this is precisely the time of year when it's easiest to see birds in action because they are courting each other, building nests and preparing to lay eggs and then incubate them. Then, when the eggs are hatched, there will be frequent feeding trips to keep those voracious youngsters happy and contented. Personally, I find the varying behaviors between species quite fascinating - there are different courting, foraging, feeding, nesting, and other behaviors driven by the same survival goal. Each species has cultivated its own approach, adapting over time with both physical and behavioral modifications that facilitates its survival, and we can observe how some species are adapting better than others to the dominant role that we humans now play on the planet. We may tend to discount sparrows, blackbirds, noisy jays, starlings, juncos and others because they're quite commonly seen and heard and thus apparently not noteworthy, but look at them as individuals trying to survive and they do become very interesting - even with individual personalities.

But, there's much more to see and quietly enjoy than only the birds and their behaviors because everything else is bursting into exuberant life - trees, bushes, flowers and grasses and so on. I find that as I look more closely at things such as the many different tree barks which are intrinsic components of that species' survival, I see the parallels with birds' plumages. Just as I wonder how and why each bird species evolved its distinctive plumage, I wonder how each tree evolved its bark? Why is the valley oak's bark so coarse while the manaznita's is so smooth? What were the adaptive pressures and dynamics? Similarly, for example, the orange oak apples or galls are quite beautiful and occur because of a reaction to a wasp intrusion by the tree; and then the various lichens on trees and rocks offer their fascinations too. In truth, there is so much to see, enjoy and ponder when one is able to spend time in the world of nature.

Having said that, I don't mean to minimize the real problems that many people face at this time and that are challenging their personal and family survival and thus making it difficult to think about going out to enjoy nature, so I suggest these things as possibilities, not as simple solutions to deep personal and family problems.

Best wishes,
Barry Boulton

TAKE ACTION PLEASE

SAVE THE GREATER SAGE GROUSE!

While many parts of our country are shutting down in response to Covid-19, the Department of Interior is continuing its efforts to weaken important protections for Greater Sage-grouse. The Department of Interior/Bureau of Land Management is planning to make decisions that impact sage-grouse in California - notably in northeastern CA, where there are sage-grouse populations that are considered part of the western population (along with sage-grouse in nearby NV).

Photo courtesy of US FWS

Background: what's happening:

In 2015, after years of work by a wide range of stakeholders - states, ranchers, conservationists, industry, scientists, and federal agencies - sound conservation plans were adopted by the BLM. The 2015 plans included strong science-based protections for the bird's most important habitat and assurances that there would be limits to the amount of habitat damaged, which were the foundation for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's finding that the species did not warrant federal protection under the Endangered Species Act. These plans also ensure sustainable economic growth for communities across the West.

Between 2017 and 2019, the Department of the Interior systematically attacked these popular bi-partisan plans. In March 2019, the 2015 plans were formally amended, resulting in weakened protections in important sage-grouse habitats in the BLM plans. In October 2019, a U.S. District Court judge in Boise granted a preliminary injunction blocking the implementation of BLM's changes to the 2015 sage-grouse conservation plans. The federal court found that the federal administration failed to consider how sage-grouse would be impacted by the BLM's changes to the 2015 conservation plans. The BLM's 2019 changes permitted expanded drilling, mining, grazing and other activities on sensitive sage-grouse habitat in ID, WY, UT, CO, NV, CA and OR. In the court's words, the impact of the changes to the 2015 plans *"was to substantially reduce protections for sage grouse without any explanation that the reductions were justified by, say, changes in habitat, improvement in population numbers, or revisions to the best science."* Additionally, the court ruled *"the record shows that the 2019 Plan Amendments were designed to open up more land to oil, gas, and mineral extraction as soon as possible."*

In late February 2020, the BLM, under guise of responding to the federal court's concerns, has opened up another public comment period. But in fact, BLM is proposing more of the same, and continues to disregard science and undermine needed protections for important sage-grouse habitat. We need strong conservation actions – those that were agreed to in 2015, which respects the years of work that went into developing the plans …

You can help by weighing in with the BLM, as they are asking for public comments. Tell BLM to maintain Greater Sage-Grouse protections. **The deadline to comment is Friday, April 6.**

You can easily provide a comment by going to the Audubon Action Center at:

https://act.audubon.org/onlineactions/qG0gnP_-LE-tVpTBKYoeLg2

Note that this is the FastAction lobbying system that I've shown before, and that allows you to submit comments with a single click once you're in the FastAction database. Then you can quickly click on future actions that Audubon sends out. While you can customize the message, it's best to simply click and send because only numbers count - they're not going to read thousands of individual emails!

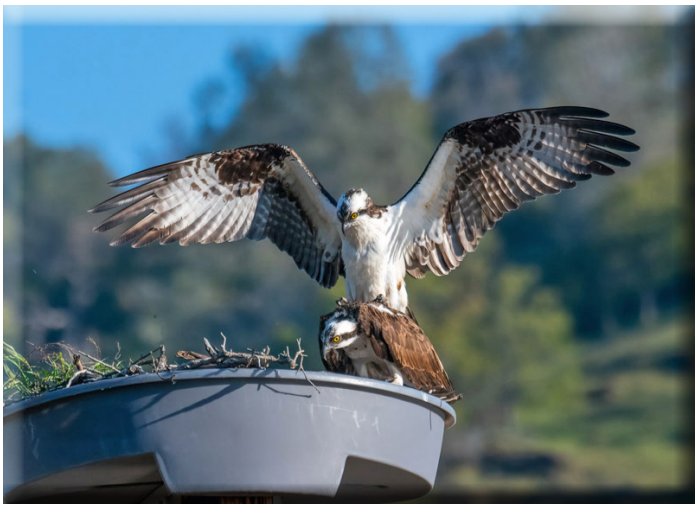
As of March 31 by Barry Boulton

OSPREY PROJECT UPDATE

Togetherness seems to be a difficult way of being for Ospreys! Having been separated over winter, this pair that have bred together for an unknown number of years, have returned to their nest at New Melones and each other. It's generally thought that Ospreys are faithful to the nest rather than to their partner. If one doesn't return (the mortality rate is reckoned to be around 10% annually for adults), the sole returnee will take another mate. Indeed, if one mate is delayed, the other might take a replacement, although if the original mate arrives late and finds an interloper at the nest, it is likely to force it to leave. Evidently, previous "ownership" of a nest is a powerful incentive to fight aggressively whereas the interloper, most likely a juvenile, is likely to be rather more prudent, perhaps unsure of itself, and reluctantly willing to wait until next year or find an alternative home.

Although, in our human way, we might think of pair-bonding as important, they actually have something more critical to attend to; they cannot breed immediately on their return because their sexual regeneration organs (i.e. testes for the male and single ovary for the female) shrink outside of the breeding season because they contribute unnecessary weight that costs energy for the bird. So, on their return, they have to go through a period of pseudo-copulations that have nothing to do with fertilization, but are required to stimulate the hormone flows that will produce sexual organ regrowth. Those copulation attempts can appear to us quite comical because the male can seem very clumsy, and the female disinterested or disdainful. I watched (and recorded on video) this male at left above attempt early copulation when the female instictively responded slightly, but obviously without interest and he sort of fell off, then hovered and tried again whereupon she brusquely brushed him off. But, this was not emotion, simply their natural process required for hormonal stimulation and organ regrowth.

In the photo shown above, the couple is getting close to solicited copulation (i.e. female now ready and willing) for real egg fertilization and egg-laying. They finally face each other; seemingly bonded as a couple whereas in the early days they just didn't face each other, didn't seem interested and engaged.



These photos by Dave Douglass at Lake Don Pedro shows a pair that have only just returned to their nest, and so this copulation is still part of the hormonal stimulation process .

So far, of the 20 Osprey nests that I'm actively watching with help from other members (thanks!), only about 4 are actively egg-laying and incubating. It's interesting to see how wide-spread is the time between pairs returning and nests becoming active. The signal that egg-laying has started is when the female sits very low in the nest and only leaves it when the male brings her food whereupon she takes the fish to a nearby perch and eats it there. For 45 days or so, she's basically sedentary, depending on the male for all her food. In fact, because she's sedentary for that time, she actually commences her plumage molt in the nest.

APRIL FIELD TRIPS - CANCELED

MARCH FIELD TRIP REPORTS

March 4 - GCSD

On the March 4 Bird Walk, we saw 43 species. Highlights Wood Ducks, Ring-necked Ducks, a Northern Shoveler two Brown Creepers, a Bewick's Wren and a Lincoln's Sparrow

Jeanne Ridgley

March 21 - New Melones, Heron Point

Photo courtesy of Walt DeGear

Here, our intrepid group show fairly good social distancing, but in the excitement of trying to see elusive birds in the bushes and trees, the discipline was difficult!

We enjoyed a quiet hike among the oak trees and manzanita bushes, appropriately seeing that iconic chaparrel bird, the Wrentit. The lake provided various grebes - two beautiful Eared Grebes, a few Western/Clark's plus the (almost) inevitable Pied-billed Grebe. A single Osprey soared overhead although, on the way in, I saw a male eating the head of his catch-of-the-day, perhaps before offering it to his mate on a nest somewhere. In all, we saw 28 species, modest but enjoyable.

Barry Boulton

March 22 - Indigeny

Eight of us met in the Indigeny parking lot. While the tasting room and gift shop were closed owing to the corona virus, we still took advantage of the open grounds. Halfway through our walk, trying our utmost to maintain a 6 ft. distance, we crossed the creek on the "unstable looking" but very solid log to the other orchard. We wound our way around to the far edge of the Indigeny property where there is a pond. Highlights included Cedar Waxwings, a Red-shouldered Hawk and a Lark Sparrow. We also saw 6 Purple Finches, an uncommon bird at this elevation, who we think may be nesting in this area. In particular, everyone enjoyed exploring or learning about another area to bird near Indigeny. The McDows, who have been Birding this area for a while, shared their insights. While we have suspended our current field trips, I look forward to future trips in this beautiful and often bird rich locale!

Kit DeGear

MARCH SIGHTINGS

March 3

This morning I got the urge to go down to our local Bald Eagle nest at our lake just to make sure that there's still some "sitting" going on, and there was. I only saw the mama. I then drove around looking for other things to possibly shoot and ended the outing by stopping by another part of our lake that has a popular treetop perch for the Eagles and there was papa. Yes! I got as close to him as I could, and waited patiently for a possible taking off/action shot and a flying overhead shot.

Maybe even a grabbing for a fish shot from the water, which was as smooth as glass. I usually can only get these Eagle shots from a boat. Isn't there an old expression, "patience prevails"?

March 27

I thought that our pet Bald Eagles had flown the coup earlier this week but, I was just down there for a look and saw this sight.

Note the two little fuzzy gray heads there in the nest. I waited for a while in hopes of seeing the other adult fly in with some breakfast but alas, that did not happen.

Dave Douglass, Pine Mountain Lake

Double-crested Cormorant landing at Pine Mountain Lake by Dave Douglass

MARCH SIGHTINGS (cont)

March 11

Greg Robbins shot this little Western Bluebird in our birdbath yesterday (in Soulsbyville at 3,200 feet elev). This bird was really enjoying the bath. They seem to come to our deck only for the bath and ignore our bird feeder, thistle socks, and suet. We have seen them going inside the clumps of local mistletoe, so I guess they prefer the berries to our seed.

Jean Dakota

POSSIBLE OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

May 2 - Sierra Outdoor School Project

(Date subject to the coronavirus emergency)

I hope to conduct a "BioBlitz" to discover the biodiversity that surrounds the campus of Sierra Outdoor School. A few years ago, members of CSAS joined us during a previous BioBlitz to count the variety of bird species around campus. During this previous BioBlitz, the individuals conducting it were finding the biodiversity of the area to see how the Ponderosa Pine Tree die off had affected the area. Now that the Ponderosa Pines are improving, we will take a look at the biodiversity of this area to see if there has been a significant amount of change since this event. I would love to have your help with this endeavor and your birding expertise would be greatly appreciated!

The BioBlitz (subject to the emergency) will take place on May 2nd at Sierra Outdoor School located at 15700 Old Oak Ranch Rd. Sonora from 8:00am-12:00pm. The birding group will arrive earlier in the morning, around 6:30 or 6:00 if possible. There will be continental breakfast and coffee provided and everyone regardless of age are welcome to join!

The date is, of course, being currently reassessed with late May/early June as possible times. If interested, please contact Elizabeth Bentz at ElizabethBentz@clovisusd.k12.ca.us

May 9 - Butterfly Count at New Melones

(Date subject to the coronavirus emergency)

Be a part of this Citizen Science project at New Melones as we identify and count these amazing floating pollinators. Come join us for this great family day and be part of science. If interested, please contact Josh Pelham at jpelham@usbr.gov

Milbert's Tortoiseshell Butterfly by Barry Boulton

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/

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