

Central Sierra Audubon Society

# Sierra Squawker



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

November - 2020

## PUBLIC ZOOM PRESENTATION

**Wednesday, November 18, at 7pm**

**"Water Harvest"**

by

**Nancy Muleady-Mecham**

Join Fulbright Scholar, Dr. Nancy Muleady-Mecham for this insightful presentation on water, its properties, occurrence, use, and power. She will discuss nature, history, location and use. There is so much to learn about our precious resource here in California.

Nancy E. Muleady-Mecham, Ph.D., is Adjunct Professor of Biology, Northern Arizona University, Visiting Lecturer, University of Virginia Semester at Sea, and Fulbright Scholar, Gorno-Altai State University, Russian Federation. She is retired U.S. National Park Ranger.

**Zoom log-in information:**

### **COMPUTER:**

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84375984923?pwd=WUhTTDE4TWlxUDgvREVvdVZLNTRIQT09>

**PHONE: (669)900-9128 Meeting ID: 843 7598 4923 Passcode: 190054**

You might like to log on 5 minutes before 7pm just in case you run into problems; it also gives you time to say "hello" to those already logged in so that we can start on time or close to.

## **FIELD TRIPS IN OUR NEW COVID WORLD**

For the time being, we are organizing one auto-based trip per month to minimize social interactions although not eliminate them completely, so standard covid measures will be necessary from time to time.

There will be spots along the way during these trips where we may want to get out of our cars, and in those places and circumstances we will observe strict social-distancing protocols. Everyone participating in these group events is requested to take their temperature on the day of the trip, and it must be below 99 degrees to participate. Masks and hand sanitizer should be part of everyone's supplies as well as water, sunscreen, hat, and birding equipment. There can be no sharing of scopes etc.

## UPCOMING NOVEMBER FIELD TRIP

### **Thursday, November 12 - Cosumnes River Preserve**

**M**idweek trip to observe both Greater and Lesser Sandhill Cranes resting, eating, and dancing in flooded farm fields. Our first stop will be Woodbridge Road where we can view and photograph the Sandhill Cranes and numerous other birds at several spots along this public road.

**W**e will move on to the 2,000 acres of the Cosumnes River Preserve that are managed by private and government agencies. The Preserve hosts a rich variety of up to 90 seasonal bird species including shore birds and migrating ducks. Expect to see Black-bellied Plover, Black-necked Stilt, Greater Yellowlegs, Dunlin, Long-billed Dowitcher, and many other species.

**L**unch will be at the picnic tables at the Preserve Building's covered deck where we can use their restrooms. After, we will take the Lost Slough Wetlands Walk path (asphalt paved) followed by the River Walk Trail. The "River Walk" trail is compacted earth, and will place us much closer to the migratory ducks.

**T**ime permitting, we will proceed a few miles north to West Walnut Grove Road and travel west to N. Staten Island Road where we would expect to see numerous Sandhill Cranes and Cackling Geese.

**I**n Sonoma, meet at Barrows Café (formerly Perkos) at 7:00am and caravan to Lodi, a 90 minute drive, stopping briefly at the Shell Gas Station in the Copperopolis Town Square at 7:30am to pick up any cars coming from Calaveras County. The next stop will be at Hwy 12 and I-5 in Lodi for bathroom breaks and coffee before arriving at Woodbridge Road. Wear layered clothing; bring a mask, hand sanitizer, lunch, snacks, water, and binoculars if you have them. We will not be sharing scopes or binoculars. We will be back in Sonoma by dinnertime.

Everyone participating in these group events is requested to take their temperature on the day of the trip, and it must be below 99 degrees to attend.

**The trip leader is Jean Dakota; please call her to let her know you are joining us: (209)591-9952 or [jdakota002@comcast.net](mailto:jdakota002@comcast.net)**



**Greater Sandhill Crane dancing at Cosumnes**

*Photo by Lucia Gonzalez*



**Black-bellied Plover in winter plumage at Cosumnes**

*Photo by Barry Boulton*



**Cackling Geese at Staten Island**

*Photos by Barry Boulton*



## October Field Trip Report

Our first organized field trip for several months to the Merced NWR on October 8 was a pleasure with 40 species showing up on a very bright day, along with a few irritating insects! Despite minimal wetland areas available to the migrants, not only were the Sandhill Cranes back in good numbers, but some Greater White-fronted Geese were present too - but no Snow or Ross's yet. Not too many ducks yet either. A rarely seen Ring-necked Pheasant showed itself rather demurely for a little while, but no Sora in sight although we did hear a Virginia Rail.

Apart from the semi-exotic birds we always look for, I was rather taken by the easy-to-forget American Pipit that commonly situates itself among the grasses and shore-line vegetation along the far side of the auto-route. I shot some close-ups and am fascinated by the delicate precision of its head and features: particularly those large eyes with their very distinctive rings. The ring appears to be individual feathers surrounding the eye, which reminds me that the American Dipper actually has white feathers on its eyelids!

At any rate, I wonder what is the function of that eye-ring? Could it be a form of camouflage, or a mechanism to make a predator hesitate long enough to enable the Pipit to escape? Or is it an aid in foraging for insects and seeds? Perhaps it helps to direct its vision as it searches and selects food items so quickly?

As we watch these little birds foraging, we see that they make very quick decisions whether to select or discard specific food items, so their visual and tactile responses are several times faster than our own, which makes me think that eye rings are most likely related to that purpose.



**Ring-necked Pheasant at Merced NWR**  
*Photo by Barry Boulton*



**American Pipit along the NWR autoroute. Photos by Barry Boulton**

And why that hint of gold plumage just above the eye - what's that for? In fact, the whole plumage schema raises so many interesting questions. The two sexes are identical in plumage and so these colorations and patterns in the plumage are probably not related to sexual attractiveness. On the other hand, males are aggressively territorial during the breeding season and so they probably use plumage colors, flashing and expanding them, to increase their perceived size and strength.

The Pipit is a fairly vocal bird all year-round, although particularly in the breeding season of course, and as you see, this one was being quite vocal! It is an unusual bird in that it is one of the few ground-inhabiting songbirds that breeds on alpine meadows and the arctic tundra; evidently a robust little bird!

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# **ACTION ALERT - ARCTIC NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE UNDER IMMEDIATE THREAT**

## **PLEASE TAKE ACTION!**

**T**he Arctic National Wildlife Refuge still carries scars from seismic testing conducted in a limited area more than 30 years ago, but huge earthshaking vehicles could soon be driving over this sensitive landscape if the Bureau of Land Management plan proceeds. Modern seismic exploration cuts a dense grid of trails which leave an estimated 20,000 miles of crisscrossing tracks of destroyed habitat—that's the equivalent of almost a full trip around the Earth in a space the size of South Carolina. Convoys of 90,000 lb. thumper trucks, tractors, and bulldozers would roll over extensive areas of fragile tundra 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, for months, posing a serious threat to denning polar bears during their most vulnerable time of year.

**T**hese intrusive activities would cause long-lasting damage to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. And it's the prelude to full-blown industrialization and oil development in the vital coastal plain—the summer nesting grounds for vast numbers of birds, which migrate there through all 50 states to raise their chicks. The Refuge is also the calving area for the Porcupine caribou herd, an essential subsistence resource for Indigenous Peoples of Alaska and Canada, and it is the most important onshore denning habitat for polar bears in the United States.

**M**ost of Alaska's North Slope is already open for oil and gas development. We should not destroy one of our last wild places. Tell the Bureau of Land Management you oppose seismic oil exploration on the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge.

Sincerely,

Natalie Dawson

Vice President and Executive Director

Audubon Alaska

**Comment deadline Nov. 6**

**EASY ACTION HERE:** [https://act.audubon.org/a/oppose-seismic-oil-exploration-arctic-national-wildlife-refuge?ms=policy-adv-email-ea-x-advocacy\\_20201028\\_seismic\\_exploration\\_alert&utm\\_source=ea&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=advocacy\\_20201028\\_seismic\\_exploration\\_alert&emci=c8e46bb2-2f19-eb11-96f5-00155d03bda0&emdi=288ff09a-3e19-eb11-96f5-00155d03bda0&ccid=697478&contactdata=dZaoj2gDDv3cukwuxOrzmAYHa9t1P4IoOHBF5wvkJm-6WAGqHUOKHwkzlaOyzE4XgBeaAkEh52UiL7yuOfUDuhjVcq%2bBkaXRXhCxmdy9VW3ysMEVHEuW9kXyJFjih4B-CqniWmMfRq6SLkZebMgBpo0%2fPB4ymbazBmRnpamMH3S%2bgFBR19L9RCa%2fdyOQu4SjL4OX%2fPJQ3BfZ-96B%2bDIbvWhcHBtKybK2i4SjSlMbgdvzpATXwX1z0Rx0TjkeeSJYOhy](https://act.audubon.org/a/oppose-seismic-oil-exploration-arctic-national-wildlife-refuge?ms=policy-adv-email-ea-x-advocacy_20201028_seismic_exploration_alert&utm_source=ea&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=advocacy_20201028_seismic_exploration_alert&emci=c8e46bb2-2f19-eb11-96f5-00155d03bda0&emdi=288ff09a-3e19-eb11-96f5-00155d03bda0&ccid=697478&contactdata=dZaoj2gDDv3cukwuxOrzmAYHa9t1P4IoOHBF5wvkJm-6WAGqHUOKHwkzlaOyzE4XgBeaAkEh52UiL7yuOfUDuhjVcq%2bBkaXRXhCxmdy9VW3ysMEVHEuW9kXyJFjih4B-CqniWmMfRq6SLkZebMgBpo0%2fPB4ymbazBmRnpamMH3S%2bgFBR19L9RCa%2fdyOQu4SjL4OX%2fPJQ3BfZ-96B%2bDIbvWhcHBtKybK2i4SjSlMbgdvzpATXwX1z0Rx0TjkeeSJYOhy)

## **Sightings & Stories - End of Summer**

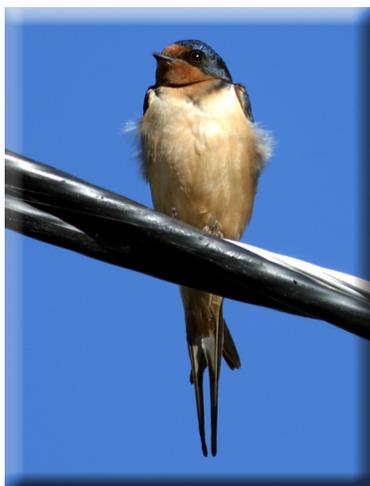
Well, the summer's end is fast-approaching, so here's a round-up here with various stories provided to me.

### **June 11**

**G**reg Robbins captured this photo of this House Finch yesterday at our birdbath in Soulsbyville. This fellow hung around the bath for 5 minutes, allowing

Greg to take its picture. I don't remember ever seeing this much red coloring on a house finch before. Maybe this bird was born just this year?? We enjoyed watching him sit around until he was dive-bombed by a Scrub Jay.

**G**reg took these shots of this lovely Barn Swallow in Willow Springs, today. We also saw this bird yesterday, so there must be a nest nearby.



**Jean Dakota**

## The Ritual of the Bird Bath

by Alan Beymer

There are three bird baths in our yard, each of them regularly supplied with clean water, therefore equally attractive--to us. But the birds do not feel the same way. They have favorites, and a pattern is developing: other than robins, birds that bathe in the backyard do not bathe in the front yard. And vice versa. Let's get this part of the bird bath story out of the way: American Robins bathe anywhere, anytime and other species can wait their turn. Beyond this, there seems to be a bath preference based on demeanor.

The non-bathers are wild turkey, mourning dove, quail, rufous towhee, Steller's jay, acorn woodpecker, northern flicker, band-tailed pigeon, white-breasted nuthatch. These nine species may drink, but do not bathe in our yard. Quail and turkeys dust bathe. One hopes the others have bathing arrangements in alternate locations. Of the four regular bathers, two refuse to bathe in the backyard. The regular backyard bathers are robins and grosbeaks. The front yard bathers are robins, California towhee, and junco.

Perhaps if one knows the why of bird bathing, one can understand the how and where. But exploring the literature on bird bathing raises more questions than answers. Joe Smith, writing in "Cool Green Science," (March 9, 2015) asks: What does science tell us about the importance of a good bath to a bird? The answer: surprisingly little! A study published in 2009 stated it plainly: "Birds of most species regularly bathe in water, but the function of this behavior is unknown." (Animal Behavior--Brilot, Asher, & Bateson.)

David Sibley, in *What It's Like To Be a Bird*, says that birds bathe to "rejuvenate their feathers." For the moment, let us assume that a good bath and preening allows feathers to regain optimal flight shape. However, it appears that while bathing, birds are vulnerable to predators. Is this the reason for different birds in different baths?



Our front-yard bird bath seemed neglected and my bird-watching sessions there went birdless. So I set a visual trap with a remote-controlled camera, waited indoors and the shy ones arrived--junco and California towhee. They took long, luxuriant baths with water flying, followed by elaborate preening in the nearby camellia bush. Juncos and California towhees readily compete with other species for food in the backyard, but their affinity for the front bird bath took me by surprise until my wife, Claudia, pointed out that the front-yard bath is very close to camellia bushes and these bushes may afford a sense of security that the backyard baths do not. Further observations revealed that the juncos and towhees routinely hop from the bath to the camellia thicket and preen there. Therefore, a conclusion might be made that having shelter near a bird bath is as important as the bath itself.

*Photos by Alan Beymer*

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### July 10 by Aleasha Gough, Jackson

From my understanding, Ravens are not a migratory bird. This morning at dawn I was out watering the garden and I counted 117 Ravens flying west from an eastern direction. Never in my life had I seen such a sight. There were large amount of croaks with vibrant and fast beating of their wings. They were not flying as high as I've seen migratory birds in the Spring, but they were higher, maybe like 200 feet in the air. I am in the central foothills of California in the town of Jackson. Any idea where they were going? Is this common behavior for the Raven. Any insight would be appreciated. I am a lover of these birds and to see so many left a tingle of excitement for me this morning and also a small concern for the sheer amount and pace of this flock.

(continued on p.6)

**Editor's comment:** As you said Aleasha, there is little evidence of Ravens migrating, but "migration" has some variations, one of which is local or regional movements. That is, birds that we don't regard as migratory species, like the Raven, often move short distances north or south, or up/down in elevation, in response to food and environmental conditions. I would tentatively assume that the unusually high number you were seeing was due to a group of Ravens moving into the local area for one of those reasons, perhaps joining with the "regulars" - and then all flying overhead to a roosting site overnight.

**June 27 by John Sutake, Arnold**

What's the difference between a bird eating at a feeder and being eaten? Apparently about twelve inches.... While sitting on my front porch, I heard a commotion at the feeder. In the second it took me to look up, all I could see was small, soft feathers floating down. At first, I didn't understand what had happened. Although previously I had noticed a female Cooper's Hawk in the garden, the Steller's Jay at the feeder seemed unperturbed. He was eating suet which was hanging below the black oil sunflower seed part above his head. The victim - a Purple Finch - was eating from the top of the feeder. A fateful choice as it turned out. On a previous visit by the hawk the birds saw it coming and went totally silent and disappeared into the foliage. After about fifteen minutes they resumed their normal activity.

Luck was also with the Steller's Jays who fledged three young this year. Last year a Raven got all three. I noticed each parent jay used a separate "secret" flight path while going to the nest. They didn't want to remind the Raven of the nest location. Can Ravens remember a food location a year later? That's a good question.

In addition to flocks of fifty or sixty Band-tailed Pigeons I discovered I have at least one local breeding pair. I saw a newly fledged juvenile being watched over by its parents. I noticed two field marks that differed from an adult. The lack of a white neck collar and a gray tip to its tail. Sibley shows this. They also stick around late in the evening after the flock has left. I haven't been able to locate their nest area. **Can anyone in the Arnold area help?**

I have to admit that I'm not very good at birding by ear. But, even I can recognize a bird alarm call. So when my resident Steller's Jay went ballistic at twilight I paid attention. Following its gaze I saw a large, tawny animal drinking from one of two ground bird baths; one I have fenced to preclude cats and raccoons. This other is open to all comers. I added it to reduce competition at the first. This animal had a very long black tipped tail and strong back legs. After about five minutes (it must have been very thirsty) it got up and sauntered down the driveway. What a thrill! A mountain lion (puma, cougar) at my bird bath! I've always said that a water feature could attract more species than a feeder alone, but I didn't expect a *Felis concolor*.

**June 14 by Alan Beymer, Arnold**

A pair of California Towhees have been quietly coming and going through our backyard all spring. Today, much to our delight, they brought their young to feed. The fledglings were not loud, but waited near the mother with expectant mouths. However, they seemed to have the hang of foraging on their own when mom was occupied by one of their siblings. I took a first set of photos from indoors, then ventured outside and they paid me very little attention. Apparently, I am not threatening. But when a full-sized wild turkey came strolling through the yard, the towhees vanished, and the photo session was over.



**Parent California Towhee feeding juvenile**  
*Photo by Alan Beymer*

**July 23 by Ellen Reintjes, Pinecrest**

This morning I saw three Eared Grebes in breeding plumage swimming in the middle of Pinecrest Lake. First time I recall seeing them in the height of summer.

**Oct. 27 by Jack Sobieski, Murphys**

Here in Murphys, birdwatching at my birdbath is very good with the usual Juncos, Band-tailed Pigeons, White-crowned and Golden-crowned Sparrows, Spotted Towhees, Western Bluebirds, Anna's Hummingbirds, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Thrushes, a couple kinds of finches, wild canaries, and Titmice. These are the usuals...can be seated 10 feet away for good pics. I find that the mornings from 7:30 to 9 am are best.

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## CSAS Bluebird Boxes - 2020 Summary

The monitoring of the Audubon bluebird boxes along highways 108 and 49 is complete for 2020 and the following is the summary of the data that were collected:

18 boxes along Highway 108 were monitored by Ralph Retherford and Jean Dakota.

- They found a total of 79 eggs hatched and 70 birds fledged. Of these, there were 18 Ash-throated Flycatchers, 31 Tree Swallows, and 21 Western Bluebirds. 2 of the 18 boxes were not used (except one by a mouse) and there were no double-clutches.

The 24 boxes along Highway 49 were monitored by Gail Witzlsteiner and David Tozier.

- They found that 126 eggs hatched and 117 birds fledged. Of these, there were 6 House Wrens, 16 Ash-throated Flycatchers, 12 Violet-green Swallows, and 83 Western Bluebirds. 7 of the 24 boxes were not used this season and there were 8 double-clutches.

**Gail Witzlsteiner, Birdbox Trail Chair**

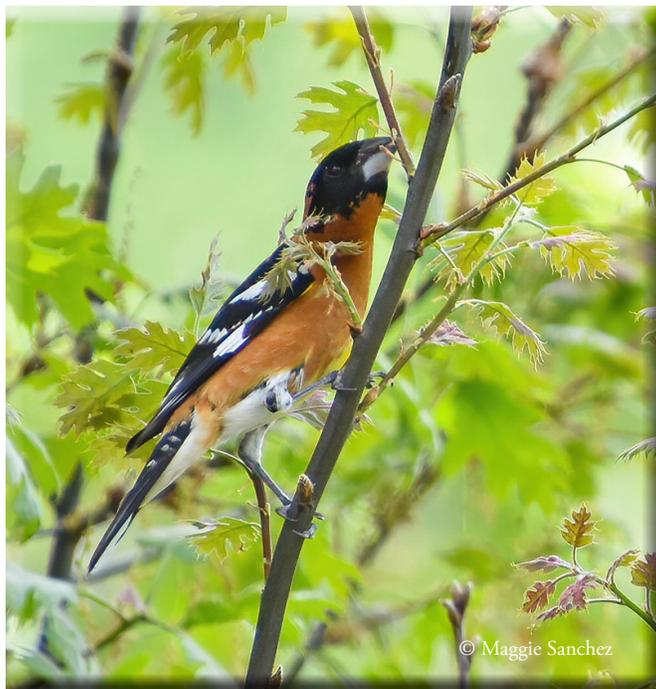


**Editor's comment:** here you see three Western Bluebird youngsters being fed by one of several adult males after recently fledging from a birdbox. As this was the first batch for this pair, the female departed to find another male for a second brood, leaving the father and unmated previous-year male adults to feed the juveniles. Note the enormous eye rings in juveniles that become much less prominent as they reach adulthood.

### Scholar's Corner

Story and Photos by Maggie Sanchez, student at Columbia College

**Northern Flicker (male):** This local resident has been a frequent visitor throughout the Spring and Summer months - yet only cooperative for this one moment. These birds scour tree trunks quickly so capturing their beauty was quite difficult and required lots of patience. I've always been mesmerized by the Flicker, with their distinct calls and bright cheek and shaft feathers. After taking these photos I was curious as to what parts the male and female. Turns out it is the



trademark cheek feathers; males have the red-orange color and the females are black. I've been quite lucky to be in their frequent presence as they always let you know when they are around.

**Black-headed Grosbeak:** This Spring I have been so lucky to have multiple Grosbeak pairs make my home their own. I spent hours observing their tactics of feeding amongst the Oak tree branches and flying around with their partners. In this photo this male was rummaging for treats in the branches while also taking a break to announce his position every once in a while.

## Wonders of the World - Travels through Birds in Art

CSAS member Ellen Reintjes who lives in Lafayette/Pinecrest volunteers for the Friends of Lafayette Library where she coordinates a monthly speaker series called "Wonders of the World" (WOW), now via Zoom seminars.

Ellen says that the next WOW on November 18, 2020, at 2 pm features the annual "Birds in Art" exhibit showcased by the Woodson Art Museum in Wausau, Wisconsin. CSAS members may enjoy this webinar and they can register and join from anywhere on Zoom. The description can be found on the Contra Costa County Library website to register:

[https://ccclib.bibliocommons.com/events/search/fq=branch\\_location\\_id:\(14\)/event/5f7bd9df91210845009e5665](https://ccclib.bibliocommons.com/events/search/fq=branch_location_id:(14)/event/5f7bd9df91210845009e5665)

This year's exhibit includes several northern California artists including Kathleen Dunphy who lives in Murphys, whose website is at: <https://kathleendunphy.com/>

Ellen goes on to say - I saw the Birds in Art traveling exhibit at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco in the mid-1980s and found it fascinating. Since 2007, My husband and I have been taking a vacation to Wisconsin in early September for the "Birds in Art" opening (except this year), and it never disappoints.

## 2020 Christmas Bird Counts (CBC)

### **SONORA CBC - Saturday, December 19**

The Sonora CBC will take place this year on Saturday, December 19th. I am, once again, pleading with you all to help us out in counting. We need bodies to pound the pavement in search of our avian friends. Your birding expertise can be anywhere on the spectrum from novice to expert. All you need to participate is the drive to be outside and assist in the largest Citizen Science undertaking in the world. Even if you cannot participate in the field, bird feeders in our yards are, collectively, a huge source of sightings. You can help us out from the comfort and safety of your home.

**Contact Steven Umland at 209.352.6985 or at [stevenum71@gmail.com](mailto:stevenum71@gmail.com) if you have questions or would like to join us.**

### **CALAVERAS CBC - Saturday, January 2, 2021**

The Calaveras CBC will be run again this season by Keith & Sandra Maurer as they have done in the last few years. This event will also follow social distancing guidelines and there will not be a meeting at the end of day. Count data can be supplied via USPS or email.

**Contact Keith & Sandra at [kandsmaurer@goldrush.com](mailto:kandsmaurer@goldrush.com)**

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### **Central Sierra Audubon Society - CSAS**

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

**Public Meetings:** Under the current C-19 regime, these are now on-line events using Zoom technology on the third Wednesday of each month at 7:00pm. Monthly details shown in this newsletter and on our website at

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

**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 you may join solely 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 for local membership 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, Conservation	(209)928-3835
Ralph Retherford, VP Programs	(209)770-6124
Jean Dakota, Secretary	(209)591-9952
Linda Millsbaugh, Treasurer	(209)586-9557
Kit DeGear, Field Trips	(925)822-5215
Gail Witzlsteiner, Membership	(209)586-4025
Jan Jorn-Baird, Publicity	(209)532-1106
Kit DeGear, Education	(925)822-5215
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