

Central Sierra Audubon Society

# Sierra Squawker



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

December - 2023

## CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNTS - COUNTERS NEEDED!

Each December, our field trips are confined to the Christmas Bird Counts (CBCs), and we invite you to join us for an interesting and worthwhile day.

CBCS are important because ever since their inception in the year 1900, these observations have provided the longest-lasting citizen science activity anywhere, such that over that time the observations provide an extensive account of bird populations, species by species.

With that data, we know unambiguously the population trends of all bird species on the continent, which helps guide conservation programs organized to maintain or recover viable populations as in cases such as the Bald Eagle and the California Condor. That is, of course, a task of some magnitude (and controversy) for which solid data is necessary - and one strand is what we volunteers provide through the Christmas Bird Counts.

See page 7 for avian population trends in different habitats extracted from "State of the Birds 2022".

### CBC Opportunities for You - please join us!

**December 16 (Saturday) - Sonora CBC**

Contact: Kit DeGear: (925)-822-5215 or [kdegear@gmail.com](mailto:kdegear@gmail.com)

**December 23 (Saturday) - Angels Camp CBC**

Contact: Bruce McClenahan: (209)323-0739 or [bgmcclenahan@gmail.com](mailto:bgmcclenahan@gmail.com)

**December 30 (Saturday) - Calaveras CBC**

Contacts: Keith & Sandra Maurer: [kandsmaurer@goldrush.com](mailto:kandsmaurer@goldrush.com)

# NOVEMBER FIELD TRIP REPORTS

## Merced NWR - November 16



*Sandhill Cranes coming in to land at sunset. Photo by Barry Boulton*

Every Fall we visit Merced NWR to see and enjoy the in-migrating birds, particularly the iconic Sandhill Cranes and Snow & Ross's Geese - but there are always many more species of interest. This rather murky day in mid-November was what you might call a "slow day" for birds - although we did still see 37 species. The Sandhill Cranes were out and about, mostly for the sunset fly-in as you see them landing near the far over-look (above). The cranes and the geese were in relatively small numbers, foraging and resting in other areas outside of the refuge, partly perhaps because the water levels in the refuge are low at this time; in fact, the first overlook on the auto tour route had very little water and no birds, a very unusual situation at this location.

Of great delight to us was a very active male Vermilion Flycatcher in the trees at the far over-look who regaled us for a few minutes with his flycatching acrobatics as the light was fading. In previous years we've seen a female near the beginning of the auto tour, so the male this year was a real delight with his audacious red plumage.

Elsewhere we heard a loud Sora who was hidden in the reeds, and in the same reedy area were a couple of probing Wilson's Snipe - but no Virginia Rails.

Plenty of White-faced Ibis were spread out in various locations, all very busy probing with that piston-like decurved bill, although the lack of bright sun hid the glossy flashing colors that we normally expect to see. Northern Shovelers were in great abundance along with a few Cinnamon and Green-winged Teal plus Northern Pintails and the inevitable American Coots.



*Male Vermilion Flycatcher with a skein of cranes in the distant background. Photo by Cyril Ashe*

Good numbers of the Greater White-fronted Goose were seen, but one notable absence was a Northern Harrier; normally we see one or two cruising above the ducks and spooking them while looking for a weak or vulnerable duck to catch.

See Kit DeGear's eBird checklist at: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S154630371>

Barry Boulton



## Indigeny - November 26

I was pleased to see the addition of a mother and her 2 lovely children to our regular contingent. They were all very good at spotting birds! A chilly start had the eight of us hurrying into sunny areas to grab some warmth from the sun but the morning soon turned into a beautiful day during which 26 species were observed. Highlights included a Great Egret flyover, Bald Eagle, Bufflehead and the plaintive call of the Golden-crowned Sparrow. Another surprise was the Steller's Jay outnumbering the California Scrub Jay. Across the lake at my neighborhood we are seeing increased numbers of Steller's this year as well. I find this to be a welcome development. I will be taking a break from Indigeny for the month of December given all of our Christmas Bird Counts and the Holidays. I hope you will join me in January. eBird checklist at <https://ebird.org/checklist/S155288044>

Kit DeGear



*Photo by Kit DeGear*

## River Walk to Fish Hatchery/ Sandhill Cranes (Camanche/Lodi) - November 30

On Thursday, November 30, thirteen bird watchers car-pooled to the Camanche Dam, Mokelumne River Day Use Area and Fish Hatchery. The skies were partly cloudy and the temps were in the low 50's. It had been reported that a Yellow-headed Blackbird was seen on a ranch near the dam, but none were seen on this trip. We did see several Greater Egrets and a Great Blue Heron. The Turkey Vultures were everywhere in the sky but we did not see any vultures eating. There were numerous salmon carcasses/ salmon heads strewn about in the river, but no vultures were eating.



The fish hatchery was open and the group saw workers removing the roe from the female salmon and then fertilizing the roe with sperm from the male salmon. The self-guided tour of the hatchery included educational signs describing the process of Salmon migration and harvesting of the eggs (roe), then the timing and growth of the fingerlings. The fingerlings were between 8 and 12 inches long and the netting was working well to keep the birds from stealing these juvenile salmon fingerlings.



*Salmon eggs*

The next stop was at Woodbridge Road in Lodi to see the Sandhill Cranes, egrets and hundreds of migratory ducks and geese. Several cranes were spotted in an area crowded by ducks and Coots. A Belted Kingfisher, several hawks and Greater White-fronted

Geese were among those species identified at this location.



*A family of Greater Sandhill Cranes with the juvenile at left. The family stays together until they migrate to the Arctic to breed in the spring. At that time, the adults return to their annual breeding area and the juveniles congregate in a sort of creche to look after themselves. From then on, the parents and juveniles have no contact.*



The group proceeded to the Cosumnes River Preserve. The migratory ducks were easier to see here as well as some shore birds (including a Wilson's Snipe). As the temperature was dropping, the trip members did not stay for the Crane "Fly-in" at dark. Total species for all three locations was 44.

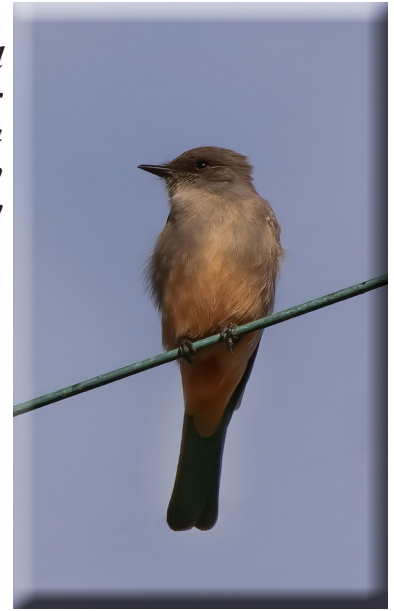
A special thanks to: Kit DeGear, Jan Jorn-Baird, Barry Boulton, Bill Bowie, Gail Witzlsteiner and Paolo Maffei, who were our bird identification specialists. Joining us for the first time was Janet (friend of Barranca and Barry), and a welcome back to Barranca Wren and Gretchen Olsen.

Jean Dakota, Trip Leader



*Left - a Kestrel at the Woodbridge Road overlook showing the familiar "tear drop" under the eye. It was probably a juvenile because it didn't fly even though we were very close - this is normally a very skittish bird.*

*Right - a beautiful Say's Phoebe, also at the Woodbridge Road overlook. It's not a rare bird, but not as common as the Black Phoebe.*



*I was delighted to see this beautifully-woven Oriole's nest hanging from the tree at the Woodbridge overlook parking area.*

*Generally only female weaves nest, but the male may assist, with one working on inside and other on outside, bringing nesting material, taking up to 15 days to build - quite an investment!*

*Apparently these nests are rarely re-used, although the pair may build another one nearby next year, perhaps using some of the old material. Anyway, probably worth checking it out next spring.*

*Photos and associated comments by Barry Boulton*

**Note:** I created a short video of various birds feeding at Consumes which you can view at: <https://youtu.be/sTi2szBL76g>

# CONSERVATION CORNER

## 211-mile road in the Gates of the Arctic National Preserve!

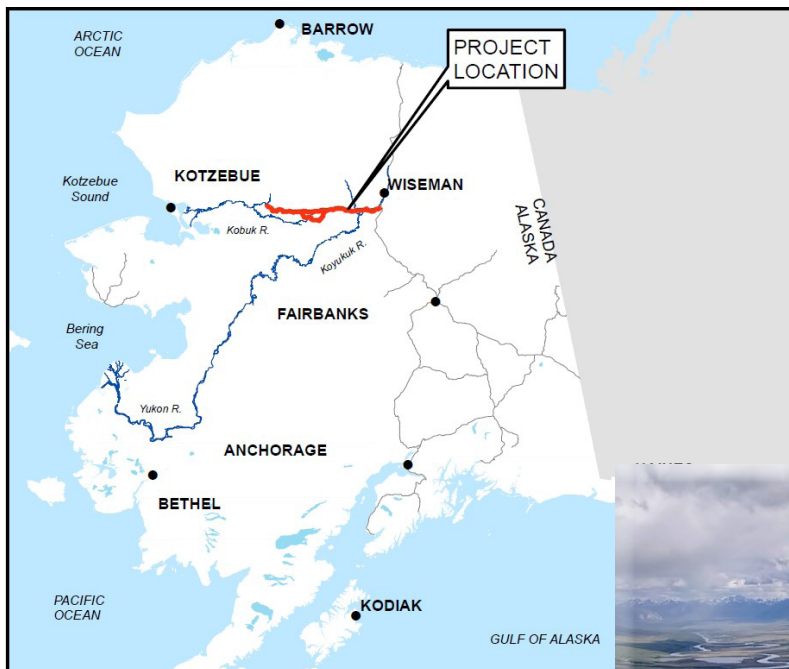
Where else to build a road but in North America's most rugged wilderness and world's largest roadless area? The proposed 211-mile Ambler Road in Northern Alaska would be built to provide access for development of an open pit copper mine. The proposed mining road is home to 131 species of nesting birds (fifteen of which are already facing serious decline), 38 mammal species and is part of the Gates of the Arctic National Preserve. The billion-dollar private road would be built with public and private funds, cross 3,000 streams, 11 major rivers, 1,700 acres of wetlands and several caribou migration routes. In 2020, the Trump Administration approved the permits for the road and were subsequently sued. A judge ordered that a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) had to be prepared to consider items overlooked in the original EIS.

The Ambler Road Draft Supplemental EIS (see link below) was released on October 20, 2023 and comments are due in 60 days. The DSEIS pdf is available at: <http://npshistory.com/publications/gaar/ambler-rd-dseis-v1-2023.pdf> Please urge the Bureau of Land Management to select the **No Action Alternative**. If the project goes ahead, the inexhaustible damage to this pristine wilderness will be irreversible.

### Write to:

Ambler Road Draft Supplemental EIS Comments  
BLM Fairbanks District Office  
222 University Ave  
Fairbanks, Alaska 99709

Bruce McClenahan, Conservation Chair



*Project  
Location*

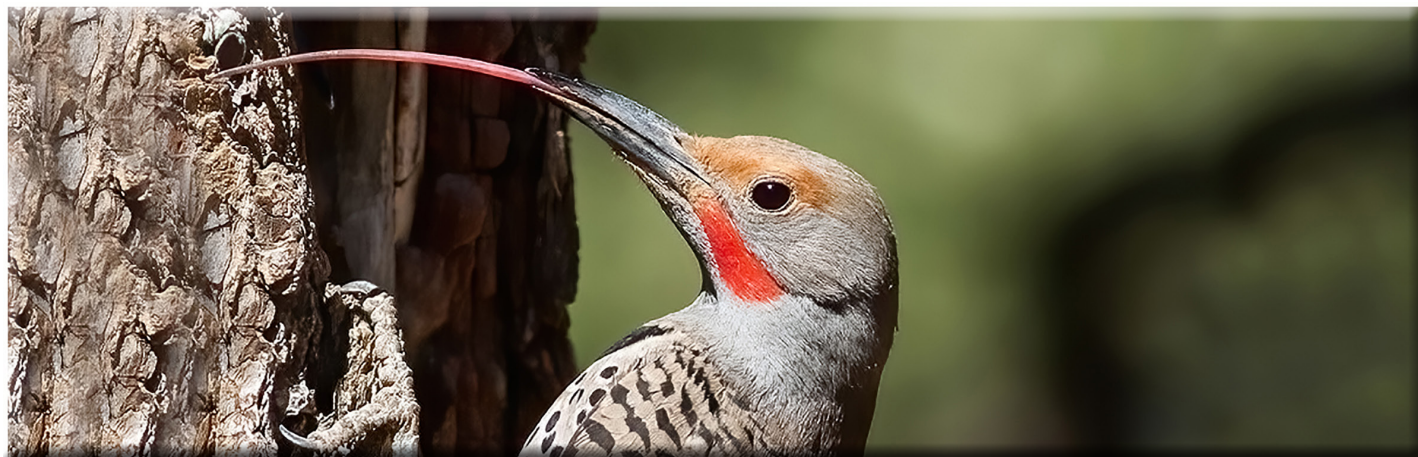


*The  
Brooks Range*



# How Does a Woodpecker's Tongue Work?

Source: American Bird Conservancy



Although seldom seen by the casual birdwatcher, woodpecker tongues are a big part of what makes these birds unique. In combination with powerful chisel-like beaks, long, specialized tongues help woodpeckers access food other birds can't. But that's not the only thing that makes these organs so special. Tongues help make woodpeckers' high-impact pecking possible in a surprising and ingenious way.

Like all birds, woodpeckers have tongues tucked inside those large beaks. Different woodpecker species use their tongues in different ways, depending on exactly what and how they eat. They all tend to have surprisingly long tongues, though, which help them reach deep into crevices in search of beetle larvae (grubs) and other prized morsels. Storing an exceptionally long tongue inside a relatively small head is a challenge, and woodpeckers have some unique anatomical features to make this happen.

How does a woodpecker's tongue work? In both humans and birds, the tongue is supported by a bone called the hyoid. Your hyoid bone is a horseshoe-shaped structure under your jaw that gives the muscles in your tongue and the floor of your mouth something to attach to. It helps you breathe, swallow, and speak.

A woodpecker's hyoid bone, however, is vastly different. The center of the woodpecker's muscle-wrapped hyoid is in the nostrils, in the bird's upper beak. It splits into a V between the eyes, and its two arms wrap completely around the woodpecker's skull, passing over the top of it and around the back before meeting up again at the base of the lower beak.

When the muscles surrounding the hyoid contract, the tongue projects forward, through the length of the beak and out its end. But when those muscles relax, the woodpecker's tongue retracts along the length of the hyoid. Yep — a woodpecker's tongue is so long that it needs to be coiled around the back of its owner's skull.

See the rest of the story at: <https://abcbirds.org/blog21/woodpecker-tongues/#:~:text=When%20the%20muscles%20surrounding%20the,the%20length%20of%20the%20hyoid>

## Upcoming California Bird Festivals

### 1) January 11-15, 2024 - Morro Bay Winter Bird Festival

Registration is open at: <https://www.signupmaster.com/mbbf/>

### 2) January 25-28, 2024 - Snow Goose Festival of the Pacific Flyway, Chico

Registration starts in early December: <https://snowgoosefestival.org/>

### 3) February 9-12, 2024 - San Francisco Bay Flyway Festival, Vallejo

Information at: [www.sfbayflywayfestival.com](http://www.sfbayflywayfestival.com)

## North American Bird Population Trends

I mentioned with reference to the Christmas Bird Counts that those counts provide one important set of data that allows us to track bird population trends over time, and this graph of such data shows those trends as of 2022.

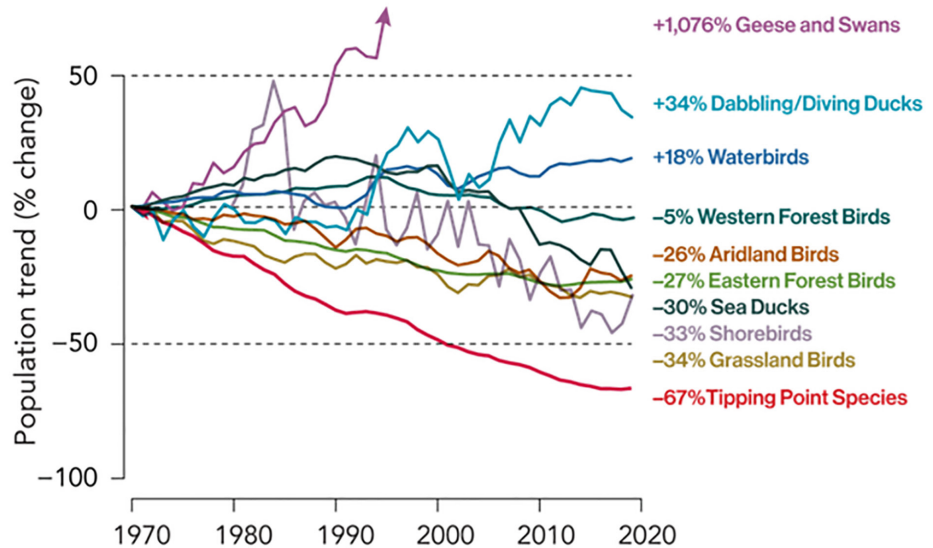
Geese and swans are doing very well and their populations are near historic highs, largely due to successful adaptation to agricultural and urban landscapes such as rice and corn crops around the Merced and Sacramento NWRs, but they are vulnerable to crop changes as well as drought.

Despite their decades-long gains, ducks continue to face pressures from grassland habitat loss, wetland drainage, coastal wetland loss, and climate change impacts. Recent droughts have tipped duck populations downward—underscoring the need for continued conservation investments to keep duck populations healthy and resilient.

Populations of some fish-eating waterbirds such as pelicans have increased greatly in recent decades, signaling an improvement in water quality. But nearly a third of waterbirds show declines, including several heron and rail species that rely on marshes and ephemeral wetlands.

In recent years, extreme and widespread drought has affected many populations of waterfowl and wetland birds in areas where they were previously flourishing. Although many bird species have evolved strategies to withstand short-term droughts, climate projections are for drought to become more severe and frequent. Recent years of extreme drought offer a glimpse at a drier future and highlight the need for more robust and resilient water supplies.

Source: "State of the Birds 2022" at: <https://www.stateofthebirds.org/2022/state-of-the-birds-by-habitat/>



### Central Sierra Audubon Society - CSAS

(Chapter of the National Audubon Society)

P.O. Box 3047, Sonoma, CA 95370

**Public Presentations:** We now conduct our monthly in-person presentations in the Sonoma Library as we did before covid, and simultaneously share them on Zoom so that you have flexibility in attendance. Monthly details shown in the Squawker and on our website at [www.centralsierraaudubon.org](http://www.centralsierraaudubon.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 available on the CSAS website at: [www.centralsierraaudubon.org/join-us/](http://www.centralsierraaudubon.org/join-us/)

### CSAS Officers

Tom Parrington, President, Conservation	(209)928-3835
Barry Boulton, Past-President	(209)596-0612
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, Director at Large	(209)586-4025
Jan Jorn-Baird, Publicity	(209)532-1106

### CSAS Committee Chairs

Bird Box Trail - Gail Witzlsteiner	(209)586-4025
Bird Box Sales - Jean Dakota	(209)591-9952
Scholarship - Gail Witzlsteiner	(209)586-4025
Website - Barry Boulton	(209)596-0612
Newsletter Editor - Barry Boulton	(209)596-0612
Education - OPEN	
YSS delegate - Walt Kruse	(707)548-1829
Conservation - Bruce McClenahan	(209)323-0739