

Sierra Squawker



www.centralsierraaudubon.org

March - 2024

PUBLIC PROGRAM

This presentation will be in-person in the Sonora library and shown on Zoom (link below)

Wednesday, March 20, at 7pm

Geology & Birds

Presented by Jeff Tolhurst

Our chapter is very fortunate in that it encompasses an elevation range from under 1,000 ft. to over 10,000 ft., which provides many different habits from grasslands through oak woodlands and on up to alpine forests. Varied habitats offer opportunities for different bird (and other wildlife) species to adapt and survive, thereby reducing direct competition for resources. For example, the Clark's Nutcracker resides up at the higher elevations where part of its survival strategy is to cache up to as many as 30,000 nut seeds (mostly whitebark pine) every year in many dispersed locations that it can recover as winter takes over. To do that efficiently, it has adapted by evolving a special pouch under its tongue that it uses to carry seeds long distances, along with a prodigious memory that allows it to recover many or perhaps most (but not all) of those seed caches. In other words, species evolution has gone hand-in-hand with the evolution of landscapes and their varied habitats.

The question that Jeff will address this evening is how the geologic processes over time produced the Sierra Nevada as we know it with such a variety of habitats and ecotones that facilitated the evolution of species with their many survival adaptations and strategies. For example, we have the Red Hills complex with its serpentine soil that supports several endemic species, and not far away is Table Mountain with a vastly different ecological complexion. In addition to habitat formation, Jeff will also briefly touch on how geology relates to migration patterns, climate and weather influence, nesting sites, birds and the fossil record, resource availability, and the impact of natural disasters on birds.

Jeff Tolhurst recently retired after teaching geosciences and geospatial technologies at Columbia College, in Sonora, CA, and has over 31 years of teaching experience. He also worked for the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), and for Trinity Restoration Associates (TRA), doing surface and groundwater studies, for another 6 years. He has a Ph.D., M.S., and B.A. in geological sciences and continues to learn more about the earth in retirement.

Zoom url: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89307683859>

MARCH 2024 FIELD TRIPS

Note: our website contains maps for each field trip and will also indicate cancellations due to weather or other reason. So, if in doubt, check it out at: <https://centralsierraaudubon.org/field-trips/>



March 21 (Thursday) - Yolo Bypass/ Raptor Center Outing

Join me for a day of adventure in the valley. We will be visiting the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area in the morning. It is about a 2 1/2 hour drive. There will be waterfowl to observe and in the past a good chance of seeing the White-tailed Kite and other raptors. Next we will visit the California Raptor Center less than 20 minutes away. This is run by the U.C. Davis School of Veterinary Medicine. While they take in injured raptors to rehabilitate and release, there are many resident raptors to view that are not releasable. So, if we didn't get a viewing of a White-tailed Kite at the Bypass Area we will see one here along with a Golden Eagle, Peregrine and Prairie Falcon and a [Swainson's Hawk](#) to name a few.

Pack a lunch and meet me at the Barrow's parking lot to carpool at 8:00 am. We will make another stop at the Shell Station in Copperopolis by 8:45 am to pick up anyone traveling from Calaveras County. Please RSVP to me for this excursion and let me know if you can drive or would need a ride - [call or text #925-822-5215](tel:925-822-5215) or [email kdegear@gmail.com](mailto:kdegear@gmail.com)

Trip leader Kit DeGear

March 23 (Saturday) - String of Pearls, Oakdale

We will start the trip at the Oakdale Recreation Area on the Stanislaus River. On our last visit in April of 2023, it seemed that a Phainopepla convention was taking place near the first pond with their competing, squabbling and courting taking center stage. Indeed, sex was in the air – literally! A pair of Turkey Vultures gave us a short and rather languid demonstration just to make sure that we understood the seasonal game plan! Of the 42 species observed, a pleasant surprise was the abundance of Lewis's Woodpeckers - will this year be as good?

Meet 8:00am 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 at 9:00am

Trip leader Paolo Maffei

March 24 (Sunday) - Indigeny

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. See my February 25 trip report (p. 4) to get an idea of the variety of species that we enjoy.

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. As always, bring your binoculars and/or scopes, wear muted colors and you may wish to include a hat, sunscreen and water.

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

Field Trip Report - Salt Spring Valley on February 3

A good showing of at least fifteen birders welcomed the one-day gap in the “pineapple” rain-river storm. Birds were somewhat in hiding from the cold, mostly overcast weather, and flooding caused some adjustments in plans for the School-house loop. And we do have to mention our outrage to see the beautiful Spanish mansion desecrated, hidden with tasteless fencing and the open viewscape of the valley behind spoiled by some uniquely ugly mystery industrial agricultural enterprise.

Of a total of 57 species, Kestrels seemed unusually abundant. Among the many Ruddy Ducks on the lake were Buffleheads, Grebes (we saw Pied, Western and Eared,) Scaup (greater or lesser?) and a lone Northern Pintail. There were no Lewis’s Woodpeckers that day, but for many, the highlight was the Rock Wren at the dam, who posed for everyone to admire. Those who finished the day on Hunt Road were treated to three of our targeted Ferruginous Hawks. All in all, a very enjoyable and productive day of birding.

View the eBird checklist at: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S160571070>

Paolo Maffei



Photos from top left:

- *The Rock Wren posing at the resort;*
- *Immature White-crowned Sparrows;*
- *The pond on Rock Creek Road;*
- *The old 1849 - 1945 Salt Spring School;*
- *Adult White-crowned Sparrow (center);*
- *Bullock's Oriole nest (last year's);*
- *Serious birders!*

Photos by Ron Lopez



For interesting history of this valley see: "Salt Spring Valley" at: <https://www.calaverashistory.org/salt-spring-valley> and "The French of Salt Spring Valley" at: <https://www.calaverashistory.org/the-french-of-salt-spring-valley>

Field Trip Report - Indigency on February 25

Although we were back to our traditional early 8am start, the sun was shining and the morning quickly warmed up. Six of us enjoyed scouting for birds. Three of our group were new to birding at this location. 31 species were observed.

Highlights included a Bald Eagle, a Great Blue Heron flyover, Bufflehead and Ring-necked Ducks viewed by walking through the reeds to the lake and a nice sighting of a Downy Woodpecker.

One hawk species was seen flying away without offering any identifying features. We did hear a brief somewhat faint call of a Red-shouldered Hawk which we determined to be a Steller's Jay trying his best to fake us out!

See the eBird checklist online at <https://ebird.org/checklist/S162944624>

Kit DeGear



Wandering in Calaveras County

As I write this on the eve of a forecasted winter blizzard, it's nice to know that the birds and the bees - not to mention the plants - are all working on reproduction! The buckeye tree - which is so smart that it's adapted to California by being the first tree to show that fluorescent green and get its reproductive cycle done before excessive summer heat - is well under way.

Ospreys are mostly back and just yesterday (2/28) I watched this male at the Iron Horse campground in New Melones sitting rather disconsolately (or so I thought!) on his badly-depleted nest which will need a lot of rebuilding to get it up to standard. But, instead of getting on with the job, he's apparently waiting for his mate. This upcoming storm will do him no favors, but when his mate arrives, activity will commence in earnest.



In contrast, this Great Blue heron was getting on with the job in this rookery of at least three pairs.



Western Bluebirds in their spectacular attire were busily courting and, of course, I took many photos, but this American Goldfinch that came and went in a flash was an unusual pleasure for me.

Yellow-rumped Warblers were also in attendance, but not one Phainopepla yet in the prolific mistletoe - probably because the oaks haven't yet provided any greenery for camouflage. Of course the ubiquitous Scrub Jay, Raven and Turkey Vulture were also in attendance - along with a gorgeously iridescent common green bottle fly that I captured on-camera!



Well, that was New Melones, but nearby Camp 9 provides good, although sparse, birding. Just beyond the road bridge a female Bald Eagle was hunkered down low in her nest, apparently incubating. I first saw the pair in late January when she appeared to be ready to start laying eggs so, given a 35-day hatching period, we might see youngsters in mid-March.

At the far end, there's a fast cascade on the river where a sole female Common Merganser was efficiently surface-feeding in the fast-moving currents. You can see a 2-minute video of her in action at: <https://youtu.be/vFkFyajvnG8> There were also several butterfly species foraging for salt and minerals - see the Echo Azure video at: <https://youtu.be/XQrvceps6iU>

Barry Boulton

CONSERVATION CORNER

ICARUS – The “Internet of Animals”

(International Cooperation for Animal Research Using Space)

Imagine a powerful conservation tool that could collect location and other data from a Hudsonian Godwit on its 10,000-mile migration from Alaska to the tip of South America. That dream is now reality, and the research possibilities are endless. Two decades in the making, the Max Planck Institute of Ornithology in conjunction with many others, (including the Russian Space Agency) attached the ICARUS antenna to the International Space Station in April 2018. ICARUS can not only track locations and migrations of birds and animals but can also transform each bird or animal into flying, walking, or swimming weather stations.



Transmitters weighing as little as 5 grams (about 6.5% of the body weight of an American Robin) contain a lithium-ion battery, a radio, a GPS locator, a temperature, humidity and pressure sensor, two antennas and a solar cell. So, you might ask how is this a conservation tool? Or don't we already know migration routes? Don't we already have enough weather information? The answer to the last two questions is No.

We know definitively that climate change is altering habitats, changing the timing of the seasons, for instance when flowers bloom or larvae hatch. With ICARUS scientists are able to see how ecosystems are changing in real time and how birds and other animals are responding to those changes. Biologists are discovering new habitat requirements and new migratory paths that will allow for targeted on the ground conservation measures.



There is one glitch – International Cooperation. When ICARUS became operational in September 2020, the world was at peace. In March 2022, shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine the Russians took ICARUS offline. I do not know how many research projects were hamstrung by that decision, but in October 2024 a new and improved ICARUS is being launched, a micro satellite called CubeSat. CubeSat will be able to receive data from 15 million individual transmitters that will be more energy efficient and lighter, weighing only 1-2 grams, allowing even more birds and some insects to carry the transmitters.

One more thing for the Citizen Scientist - the Animal Tracker App (free). When back up and running there will be opportunities for you to follow an animal and provide critical data. Knowing where an animal is and the weather is one thing but, if you can observe a known location of a bird or animal and report back (through the app) the behavior you're seeing, that information is of high value and the ultimate goal and reach of ICARUS. Take a look at Animal Tracker and the

limited number of animals currently being tracked with ground receivers.

Learn more - <https://www.icarus.mpg.de/en>

Contributed by Bruce McClenahan, Conservation Chair

Bird-of-the-Month

Swainson's Hawk

Ever since I first observed a flock of Swainson's Hawks foraging in this alfalfa field near Discovery Bay (this one is eating a small rodent), this species has intrigued me. A "flocking hawk" you might ask, but aren't raptors solitary birds? Well, yes, they mostly are - but not this one. A highly gregarious species, the Swainson's Hawk forages in large flocks known as "kettles", and several times I've observed over 50 in such kettles. To observe tens of raptors circling, aiming and diving down to hit and catch their prey is a fascinating and surprising sight.



Not only is its sociality unique for a raptor, but its diet is also different; in the breeding-season its diet is similar to that of our common species such as the Red-tailed Hawk - young are fed rodents, rabbits, and reptiles - but outside of the breeding season, the diet becomes more opportunistic and more insectivorous, comprising grasshoppers, crickets and dragonflies. Some accounts describe them pouncing at and running down grasshoppers and crickets in large groups just like domestic turkeys do. They frequently used to be seen catching dragonflies in the air with their talons on their Central Valley breeding grounds, but that is much less common now, likely because dragonfly populations have declined dramatically due to widespread use of neonicotinoid pesticides.

Swainson's Hawks have one characteristic in common with Red-tailed Hawks which is that both have very variable plumages, the Swainson's even more so. There are light and dark morphs as well as intermediate morphs, none of which are fixed, so the variations are almost infinite. Actually both species are about the same size, but the Swainson's has narrower and more pointed wings than the Red-tailed's more rounded tips. While the Red-tailed has that diagnostic black petagel on the leading edge of the wing, the Swainson's dark feathers are on the trailing edge, so the two species are not easily confused in flight.

Where might you see one? Well, Salt Spring Valley is one known location, and then the grasslands along roads such as Willms and Rock River off the 108 corridor west of Jamestown and towards Oakdale provide suitable habitat. Also, see Kit DeGear's notes on her March 21 field trip to the California Raptor Center (p.2).

If you do sight a Swainson's, please email me with your sighting info, and also enter it in eBird which is short of Swainson's data up here.

Barry Boulton rbarryboulton@gmail.com



Intermediate morph adult kiting - it typically hunts rodents by hovering high over a field and then plummeting to earth with talons extended to strike its prey, often voles in California.



Great Backyard Bird Count 2024 - GBBC

In the February newsletter I mentioned the upcoming GBBC which is now completed. Cornell Labs compiled the more than 7,800 species observed (out of a worldwide total of ~10,000 species) and over 125,000 photos. You can see a subset of amazing photos from all continents (except the Arctic) here: <https://www.birdcount.org/bird-and-people-photos-gbbc-2024/>

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Call for Photographers!

C SERC's Winter Photo Contest is now open for entries through March 15. As they say *"Our photo contest is aimed at raising appreciation for our native wildlife and scenic natural landscapes in wintertime. Cash prizes will be awarded for the photos that best capture the awe-inspiring beauty of our region's scenic natural landscapes and/or local native wildlife in winter"*.

View the contest details at: <https://www.cserc.org/news/winter-photo-contest-now-open-for-entries-2024/>

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Stanislaus Audubon March/April Newsletter

The **Valley Habitat** is a joint newsletter of the Stanislaus Audubon and Yokuts Group of the Sierra Club which details their activities and programs, some of which may interest you.

View it at: <https://centralsierraaudubon.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/March-April-2024-Valley-Habitat-FINAL.pdf>

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Sierra Foothills Chapter of the CNPS (California Native Plant Society)

I'm pleased to say that after a hiatus, the Sierra Foothills Chapter of the California Native Plant Society has restarted with great energy. I've uploaded their latest excellent and informative newsletter, **The Shooting Star**, to our website and you can view it at <https://centralsierraaudubon.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/February-2024-CNPS-Shooting-Star.pdf> Also, if you go to their website at <https://chapters.cnps.org/sierrafoothills/> you can sign up for the newsletter.

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ICARUS – The “Internet of Animals”

For history buffs, the age-old legend of Icarus is quite fascinating and provides some insight into how easily people are led to believe the unbelievable. See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Icarus>

Central Sierra Audubon Society - CSAS

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

Public Presentations: We now conduct our monthly in-person presentations in the Sonora 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

Board Meetings: Please call Tom Parrington (209)928-3835

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/

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