



ESAS Website: ESAudubon.org *Eastern Sierra Bird Sightings:* ESAudubon.org/birds/

Meetings

2nd Wednesday of the month
September-June, 7:00 PM,
usually at
White Mountain Research Station
3 miles east of Bishop on
East Line Street.
Check local media for possible
changes.

Evening Programs

Evening programs will be preceded by announcements of interest to the membership, and recent bird sightings and other local natural history news. Come prepared to participate!

September 13

What's all the fuss about groundwater pumping?

Daniel Pritchett

What's the first thing you picture when you think of Owens Valley? Probably not meadows! Yet extensive meadows were among the features that most impressed the first Euro-American visitors. Many factors have played roles in the loss of meadows, but, as of signing of the 1991 Inyo-LA Long Term Water Agreement (LTWA), groundwater pumping is no longer supposed to be one of them. We've now had 15 years of management under the LTWA. Are meadows no longer impacted by groundwater pumping? Daniel will discuss some basic principles of hydroecology of the Owens Valley floor, the conceptual model for groundwater management under the LTWA, some problems with current management, and some potential solutions.

Refreshments: Kay and James Wilson

October 11

Birding and photographing San Salvador Island

Beverly Schroeder

Join Beverly Schroeder on a reminiscence of her birding expedition to San Salvador Island. Five hundred (plus or minus fourteen) years ago, Columbus sailed the ocean blue and set foot in the new world on the tiny Bahamian "out" island of San Salvador. Much more recently, White Mountain Research Station's former manager Dave Trydahl accepted the position of station manager at San Sal's Gerace Research Station. Even more recently, Bev and Lynna spent a week visiting Dave and Li, and photographing rare and endangered iguanas, and avian wonders never seen on the "mainland." The cultural and natural history of this island is fascinating, and Beverly's images of bananaquits and tropicbirds will make you want to risk the rigors of sand fleas and air travel.

Refreshments: Kathy Duvall



Tropicbird

Beverly Schroeder photo

President's Message – A Tale of Two Phalaropes

Last weekend my parents visited us from the west side. As part of a day trip, we took them to the boardwalk at Mono County Park at the north end of Mono Lake. As usual, we were amazed by the sheer number of birds there. Thousands of gulls and phalaropes and hundreds of rusty-colored Eared Grebes bobbed on the lake. We even got outstanding views of elusive Virginia Rails and Soras in the reeds at the end of the boardwalk. The boardwalk is such a great place to watch birds. If you've ever been there, you know what I mean and if you've never been, you should go. (Staff from the Mono Lake State Tufa Reserve lead bird walks here at 8:00 AM Fridays and Sundays through September. Call ahead, 760-647-6331.)

At first glance all the phalaropes looked the same, grayish, long billed, actively feeding, sometimes swimming in circles: a perfect fit for Wilson's Phalarope. But upon closer inspection, we noticed slightly smaller ones mixed in with shorter bills, black eye-patches, and darker backs with pale streaks: perfect for Red-necked Phalaropes.

Seeing those two different species of phalaropes got me curious about where these birds have come from and where they are going. By consulting the new National Geographic Complete Birds of North America book, I learned these two similar species have two vastly different stories to tell.

Wilson's Phalaropes breed around alkali ponds in the Great Basin north to southern Canada. They are common in fall migration in the Eastern Sierra during July and August en route to their wintering grounds on Andean

alkali lakes of Argentina, Bolivia, and Peru. (I wonder if they are learning Spanish any better than I am.)

Red-necked Phalaropes, on the other hand, breed much farther north on the arctic tundra of Alaska and northern Canadian provinces during June and July. In fall migration, their numbers peak in the Eastern Sierra in August and early September. Unlike the more terrestrial Wilson's, the Red-necked Phalarope spends the entire winter on the open ocean off South America. So, I suppose it's possible that when a Red-necked Phalarope departs the Eastern Sierra, it might fly to the coast and keep on going, not seeing land again until next spring! Wow.

As remarkable as these two phalaropes are, their stories would be much bleaker if Mono Lake had been left to dry. These species and many others rely on Mono Lake as an important staging area, providing the food they need to continue their migrations. Mono's sister to the south, Owens Lake was once such a staging area, complete with alkali flies and massive flocks of birds. All is not completely lost at Owens Lake, however. The shallow flood dust control basins now attract thousands of phalaropes and many other shorebird species. For them, Owens Lake is hard-coded into their genes as the last place to feed on alkali flies before heading south over the Mojave Desert.

Good journeys to you and the phalaropes,

Chris Howard

September and October Field Trips and Events

Saturday September 30 – Rock Creek Birding Leaders, Claus and Connie Engelhardt. Join us for a leisurely 4 1/2 mile roundtrip birding hike along Rock Creek. Meet at 9 AM at the Sno Park on Rock Creek Road. Exit Hwy. 395 at Tom's Place. Bring binoculars, water, lunch and sturdy shoes for this 3-4 hour trip. Call 872-4596 for more information.

Saturday October 7 – Bishop Creek Cleanup The California Coastal Commission, Inyo National Forest, Friends of the Inyo, and Eastern Sierra Audubon will hold a cleanup of the Bishop Creek Drainage from 9 a.m. to noon. Sign in and refreshments at Intake II (just past the South Lake turn off on the Sabrina/North Lake Road). Bring water bottles, snacks, sun cream, protective clothing; wear closed toe shoes. Latex gloves provided; bring heavy work gloves if desired. A drawing will be held following the cleanup. For more information contact Sara Steck at 873-4320 or Kendrah Madrid at 876-6206.

Saturday, October 14 – Bishop Fall Migrants Leader, Debby Parker. Meet at 8 AM in Bishop at Dixon Lane, park at the bridge at west end of Dixon Lane, and we'll explore along the canals under the willow and cottonwoods looking for fall migrants, especially warblers and sparrows. Bring water, hats, sunscreen and binoculars for an easy level walk, ending before noon. For more information phone Debby at 872-4447.

Mexican grosbeak found in Inyo County

Tom and Jo Heindel

On 31 July, Eva Poole-Gilson looked at her bird feeders, as she often does, and saw a large yellow and black bird that was different from the other feathered visitors at her home in Keough's Hot Springs. She called her next-door neighbor, Cindy Kamler, our Eastern Sierra wildlife rehab specialist, who looked at the bird and knew that it was really different. Cindy went through her bird books and found a bird that looked very similar. She called us and said that she believed she had a Yellow Grosbeak at her neighbor's feeder. When asked if she knew how unexpected that would be, she said, "Yes I do! It is not supposed to be found in the US!"



Yellow Grosbeak is primarily a Mexican species that resides along the Pacific Slope from southern Sonora to northwestern Oaxaca plus a disjunct population in Guatemala. In summer (Mar-Sep) birds from the northern population move north to central Sonora and occasionally one forgets to stop and ends up in the U.S. Most of the few U.S. records are from Arizona, usually in the southern part, with the earliest arrival June 4th and the latest August 12th. A male spent the winter, 2005-2006, in Albuquerque, New Mexico and because it remained through May the report has not yet been ruled on by the State Bird Records Committee. A report of a wintering bird in Iowa was not accepted as a state record because it was felt it was an escaped caged bird and did not get there without human help.

Because of the male Yellow Grosbeak who wintered in New Mexico this year, many wondered if the Inyo bird could be one and the same. Curiously, both birds had deformed bills, that is, the upper mandible was shorter than the lower. But a search of the web turned up many pictures of the New Mexico bird. The right side of

the bill was different from the Inyo bird and the plumages were different suggesting that these were different birds. See the Eastern Sierra Birds website for comparison photos.

The Yellow Grosbeak remained at Keough's Hot Springs through August 2nd allowing 50-60 people to look, photograph, and marvel at this stunning bird. To determine if this sighting becomes a record, documentation and photographs must be submitted to the California Bird Records Committee for review. No one will question if the identification was wrong because this was an easy call. What must be determined is the origin of the bird. Did it get to Inyo County under its own power or was it a caged bird that was transported from somewhere in Mexico to the U.S. or along the Mexican border and escaped?

There are a number of factors that need to be explored. First is the abnormal plumage the bird was wearing. It had the black wings and tail of an adult combined with immature body feathers that included a white belly, instead of yellow, and a black back, instead of yellow, as well as a gray halo on its crown. Can this occur naturally or is it the result of captivity stress?

Second is the abnormal bill with an under-bite and the inability to close the bill completely. Bill abnormalities occur naturally, but can they be caused by captivity? Third is that captivity can cause extreme feather wear as a result of being kept in too small a cage and nail length can increase because of the less abrasive nature of cages. That said, one molt and a period of freedom will erase those indications of previous captivity.

Fourth is our distance from bird shops that might sell this species. It is illegal to sell Yellow Grosbeaks in the U.S. so the nearest source should be just south of the California-Mexico border. The fifth consideration is the timing. Based on the pattern indicated by Arizona vagrants, this is exactly the time one could appear here if this was a natural occurrence.

And lastly, there is a suite of primarily Mexican species that have already made it to Inyo County under their own power (Rufous-backed Robin, Streak-backed Oriole, Thick-billed Kingbird, Northern Caracara, Broad-billed Hummingbird, Dusky-capped Flycatcher, Tropical Kingbird, Painted Redstart, Red-faced Warbler, Varied Bunting, and Bronzed Cowbird). Is this just another who followed in the same wing beats as his predecessors?

If accepted as a natural vagrant it will be the first record of a Yellow Grosbeak for California. The decision will not be an easy one but CBRC members are used to unraveling this kind of conundrum.

Local Sparrow Lays Egg, Science Takes Note

Ecology is a giant interlocking puzzle, a puzzle the size of the world. Some of the pieces are as small as a sparrow – or a sparrow’s egg – or a fragment of a sparrow egg’s genetic code. Ecologists are people who work on that puzzle, and they don’t always know which piece they’re going to find.

Quresh Latif is a graduate student at University of California, Riverside who set out to research relationships among songbirds, their nesting habitats, and the predators who eat their eggs or hatchlings. Working with PRBO Conservation Science’s Eastern Sierra Field Station, he set up investigations in the Mono Basin that have evolved as each leads to new questions to ask and new ways of asking them. Meanwhile, a paper recently published in the renowned ornithological journal *The Condor* grew from his chance discovery.

Three years into his field work, Quresh’s focus is on learning why Yellow Warbler nests in the Mono Basin are twice as likely to succeed if they’re in Wood’s rose, the common local wild rose, instead of willow or some other shrub. Placing artificial nests – with one finch egg and one clay egg – in both willow and rose, he’s already learned that predators are less likely to rob a nest in rose even with no birds to defend – or reveal – it. “By taking away the effect of parents and nestlings,” Quresh says, “this is showing that it’s definitely predators that are cueing into the nest itself.” Bite marks in the clay eggs tell him that rodents are a major egg predator; when he analyzes the bite mark data he may find out which predators are least likely to take eggs from a nest in rose. He’s also found that artificial nests placed where real nests have already been robbed are more likely to be visited by a predator than those he places where nests have succeeded. “It lends credibility to using the artificial nests, seeing if they’re approximating what goes on with the real nests. I’m getting more information on how the rose is affecting nest predation, *and* testing the value of artificial nests.”



Song Sparrow and Yellow Warbler

Sacha K. Heath

One preliminary component of his project was video surveillance of nests, “just trying to identify what kind of predators were out there. We got some good footage and found that we had predation events by snakes, Stellar’s Jay, weasel, mouse, raccoon and Bewick’s Wren. Snakes seemed to only eat nestlings, not eggs. And we have footage of a weasel finding a nest with eggs, leaving it and coming back three days later to eat nestlings.” The camera also shed light on the role of Brown-headed Cowbirds, which not only prey on nests but also parasitize them – lay eggs and leave them for the nest owner to tend. And, the camera captured the event at a Song Sparrow nest that led to Latif et al., 2006: “At 05:00 PST on 15 July [2003] there were 6 eggs. At 05:22 PST, the nesting female was incubating when a second Song Sparrow entered the nest.... The nesting female attempted to fight off the invader, jumping on the invader’s back and flapping her wings furiously while the invader laid an egg.... At the end of the event there was clearly a seventh egg in the nest.”

Conspecific brood parasitism – a bird laying an egg in the nest of another member of its own species, leaving it for the foster parent to raise – is known in many bird species. It’s a fascinating behavior that gets ecologists thinking about how and why it might evolve, and why some species do it and some don’t. Quresh didn’t know if it had ever been observed in Song Sparrows. He mentioned the event to Mark Hauber, a biologist visiting to collaborate with another Mono Basin researcher on cowbird work; he immediately suggested and offered to coauthor the *Condor* paper, having also once videotaped a Song Sparrow laying an egg in another’s nest at a Cornell study site near Ithaca, New York. “He told me conspecific brood parasitism hadn’t been documented in Song Sparrows and I should publish it,” Quresh says. “He offered to include his data. He knew that there was no literature on that. He really knows the literature. I’d put an idea into the paper and he’d come up with the citation that supported it.

“He also got Letitia into the paper; he knew she had this genetic data.” Letitia Grenier had done a very thorough analysis of DNA from intensively-observed, color-marked salt marsh Song Sparrow mothers and their nestlings at 73 nests in Marin County, California, and was able to prove that in this case the mothers raising the babies were all the true genetic mothers. Quresh and his co-authors also included Song Sparrow nest data from more usual methods of nest monitoring, and evaluated the pros and cons of each for detecting conspecific parasitism.

The authors conclude that although a bird can only lay one egg per day, counting eggs in a nest – even daily – can overlook conspecific parasitism. Why?

“At 06:06 PST on 15 July the camera recorded the nesting female grasping an egg with her bill and removing it from the nest, leaving six eggs in the nest.” Hauber’s camera also caught a Song Sparrow removing an egg.

This could call for rethinking of theories of how conspecific parasitism might have evolved. Quresh explains, starting with the Marin population that didn’t engage in it – and also didn’t have cowbirds on site. “The only thing I can think of is that when there are a lot of cowbirds, the cowbirds are likely to depredate the nest during laying. If that happens when a female has an egg she’s about to lay, she might want to find another place to put it; so she might put it in another nest. Predation is something that could lead to parasitism when birds have this egg and nowhere to put it. The theories behind why a behavior happens are built on ecological characteristics of a system. Theories usually have a story about what ecological conditions could cause it.”

There’s been a theory that conspecific parasitism is more common in precocial birds, such as ducks, whose newly-hatched young follow the parents and feed themselves rather than needing the intensive in-nest care of altricial birds. Why? “It doesn’t cost as much for a parent to raise them, so there’s less reason for the parasitized bird to reject them. So a parent would benefit more by parasitising. If you have your own nest and it gets depredated, you still have some eggs in other nests and they have a good chance of surviving. Ducks are going to have problems with incubation but not with decreased ability to feed all the chicks once they’re hatched.”



Song Sparrow eggs

Oikonos photo

The egg the Mono Basin sparrow ejected turned out to be one of her own – leaving in her nest just one remaining egg that she herself had laid, plus another Song Sparrow’s egg and four cowbird eggs! If Song Sparrows can’t recognize an intruder’s egg, maybe they

simply evolved egg ejection as a way to avoid trying to raise septuplets.

“But the thing is,” Quresh points out, “if precocial birds aren’t ejecting eggs and the altricial ones are ejecting eggs, it’s harder to detect conspecific parasitism in the altricial birds.” So although conspecific parasitism is currently better-known in precocial birds, some scientists may back off from the assumption that it’s more common, and look for more discoveries like this one.

In gaining an egg and losing an egg, our little sparrow has fitted more than one piece into the interlocking puzzle that covers our globe.

– Joy Fatooh



Song Sparrows

John James Audubon

[Latif, Q., Grenier, J. L., Heath, S. K., Ballard, G., and Hauber, M. E.](#)

2006. First evidence of conspecific brood parasitism and egg ejection in Song Sparrows, with comments on methods sufficient to document these behaviors.

Condor 108(2):452-458.

For a PDF copy go to

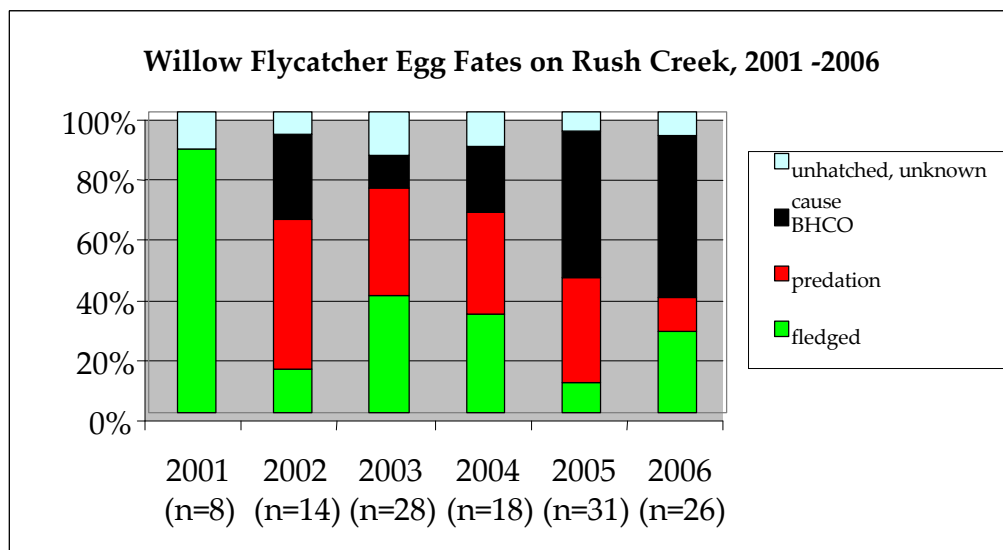
<http://www.prbo.org/cms/index.php?mid=381>

and click on the authors.

Lower Rush Creek Willow Flycatcher Update: 76/76 Nests in Rose

WAVE readers may recall that as of 2005, 100 percent of the Willow Flycatchers newly repopulating Lower Rush Creek had defied expectations and placed 50 out of 50 nests not in their namesake willow, but in Wood's rose. Now the data are in for 2006, and once again, this year's nests were all in the thorny shrub.

The rose-nesting habit is just one of the intriguing features of this Willow Flycatcher population, which arrived at Lower Rush Creek soon after water was restored to the long-dry tributary to Mono Lake. Unfortunately, by the year after PRBO Conservation Science researchers found the new population, nest predators and brood parasites had found them as well. The population is persisting but not increasing, a situation that PRBO's Chris McCreedy attributes largely to Brown-headed Cowbirds, which lay their eggs in other birds' nests. Willow Flycatcher eggs are lost when the cowbirds remove them; when the owner abandons the nest because of the cowbird's activities; when they fail to hatch due to a cowbird egg hatching first; and when nestlings fail to survive due to sharing their nest with an aggressive cowbird nestling.



Chris McCreedy, 2006

Thanks to another PRBO researcher, Chris Tonra, trapping and color-banding cowbirds, McCreedy knows that the cowbirds keeping the Willow Flycatcher population from growing are the same ones seen feeding mainly on human handouts in Lee Vining: "at bird feeders, at restaurants, and anywhere in town they can find easy subsidization. The problem is us," McCreedy says.

EPA to announce air quality health standards September 27: Will Mono and Owens be left in the dust?

As the Environmental Protection Agency reviews voluminous public comments of concern about its proposal to eliminate air quality health standards in rural areas, the Mono Lake Committee is preparing to litigate if necessary. The decision is in the hands of the EPA, with a final standards announcement expected September 27, 2006.

At issue are national health standards for clean air that apply to the massive dust storms that sweep off the exposed beds of Mono and Owens Lakes. While the choking dust storms exceed current standards by 70 times and contain toxics such as arsenic, the EPA has proposed to *eliminate* the standards entirely in rural areas across the country.

The EPA's particulate standards will apply nationwide and cover several types of particulate pollution. If the standards are not substantially improved, the Committee expects to join with concerned national groups such as Earthjustice and the American Lung Association to pursue unified litigation on all aspects of particulate pollution regulation. The Committee would focus on the situations at Mono Lake and Owens Lake. Regional air quality regulators have similar concerns about the EPA proposal and expect to join in litigation as well.

There's still time for the EPA to come around to a fair approach. If the final decision ignores the situation at Mono and Owens Lakes, the first step will be to immediately file a court request for suspension of the new decision while it gets sorted out in likely lengthy litigation. The Mono Lake Website www.monolake.org will report breaking news. For more information contact Geoff (geoff@monolake.org) at (760) 647-6595.



Willow Flycatcher on its fledge day – last fledgling of the last nest of 2006. **Chris McCreedy**

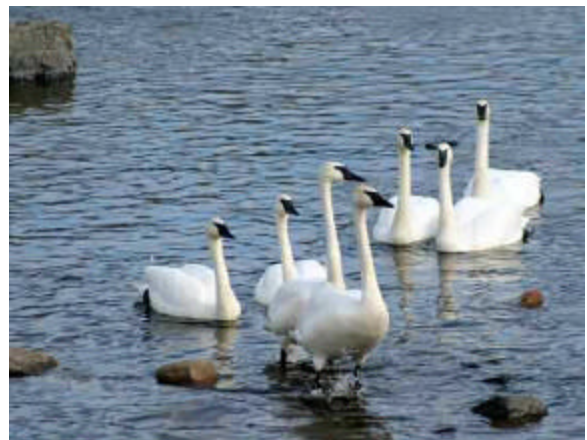
Tracking Audubon Events

If you are away from your Sierra Wave Newsletter, Audubon Event Announcements should be showing up in *Inyo Register*, *Mammoth Times*, *The Sheet*, *The Good Life*, *Mammoth Monthly*, *Sierra Reader*, *Outsideontheeastside.org*, and can be heard on KUNR, KIBS/KBOV, Sierra Wave radio and KMMT.

– *Roberta Lagomarsini, Publicity Chair*

Eastern Sierra Ornithology Quiz Answer

In the last issue we asked, “What’s the most common territorial breeding bird found by PRBO in Eastern Sierra riparian areas – occurring twice as often as the three that are nearly tied for second place? And which are *they*?” The answer: Spotted Towhee is most common, found twice as often as the three runners-up – Song Sparrow, Yellow Warbler, and Brown-headed Cowbird!



Trumpeter Swans Greg Gerjet photo
Courtesy of The Trumpeter Swan Society

Trumpeters in Trouble

Debby Parker calls our attention to the current plight of Trumpeter Swans. These majestic birds, which some of us have met on their occasional visits to the Eastern Sierra, are undergoing a massive die-off in Washington State and British Columbia as a result of consuming lead shot while feeding. More than 1300 have died of lead poisoning over the past five winters, including 400 last winter alone. The accelerating death rate is considered a serious threat to the Pacific Coast Population, the largest population of Trumpeter Swans. Can you adopt a swan? http://www.trumpeterswansociety.org/washington/Adopt_a_swan.htm tells how to help, or call (425)787-0258.

Chapter Officers

President: Chris Howard 873-7422
Vice- President: Joan Benner 938-2929
Secretary: Mary Vocelka 873-4480
Treasurer: Bill Mitchel 872-4774
Board members: Kathy Duvall Connie Engelhardt
Sally Gaines Chris Howard
Phil Kiddoo Roberta Lagomarsini
Sara Steck
James Wilson

Committee Chairs

Adopt-a-Hwy: John & Ros Gorham 938-2023
Birdathon: Michael Prather 876-5807
Conservation: James Wilson 873-3859
Peter Pumphreys 872-7846
Education: Michael Prather 876-5807
Sara Steck 873-4320
Field trips: Connie Engelhardt 872-4596
Fish Slough: Sam Glasser 873-3111
Historian: Mary Vocelka 873-4480
Membership: Kay Wilson 873-3859
WAVE editor: Joy Fatooh 933-2205
WAVE mailing: Mary Vocelka 873-4480
Programs: Chris Howard 873-7422
Publicity: Roberta Lagomarsini 872-7846
Refreshments: Joan Benner 938-2929
T-shirts: Sarah Sheehan 872-4039



The WAVE is now printed on recycled paper!

Eastern Sierra Audubon
P.O. Box 624
Bishop, CA 93515

Postmaster: Address Service Requested



Willow Flycatcher nestlings surrounded by Wood's rose
Chris McCreedy photo

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION		
Join National Audubon and Affiliate with our Chapter \$20 / yr [\$15 SENIORS (62+) / STUDENTS] Receive Audubon Magazine and the WAVE		
Name	(Please print)	
Address		
C-53		
City	State/Zip	Chapter
<i>For Gifts:</i>		
Mail Application to:		
National Audubon Society	Your Name	
Membership Data Center	Your Address	
P.O. Box 51003	Your City/State/ZIP	
Boulder, CO 80323	7XCH	
OR, Join the Chapter only \$12 / yr - full Chapter Benefits and the WAVE		
<i>Send check to:</i> Membership Chair Eastern Sierra Audubon P.O. Box 624 Bishop, CA 93515		

For National membership status call 1-800-274-4201
or click on Customer Service at www.audubon.org

NONPROFIT
ORGANIZATION
U. S. POSTAGE
PAID
BISHOP, CA
PERMIT NO. 54

Birds rare and common reveal their secrets – Inside!