



# SIERRA WAVE NEWSLETTER

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## Holiday Potluck Candlelight Dinner and Program,

**December 4, 2013, 6pm**

The December 4th meeting is also our annual Holiday potluck candlelight dinner, held at 6pm in the dining room of the [White Mountain Research Station](#).

Do plan to attend as it is a fun event, and bring a friend or neighbor! Every participant should bring a dish (entrée, salad, or dessert to serve at least 6 people, and contribute either juice, soft drinks, wine or beer to the beverage table.) Please bring your own place setting. Audubon will provide coffee, tea, juice, and a touch of wine prior to the dinner. Arrive by 6pm for our potluck dinner.



**The dinner will be followed by a program at 7pm:**

### ***Owens Lake and Owens River Important Bird Areas with Michael Prather***

Our Eastern Sierra Audubon chapter contains two of California's largest and most important Audubon [Important Bird Areas](#) (IBA's) - The [Owens River](#) and [Owens Lake](#). The Owens River provides riparian and open water habitat for songbirds, waterfowl and marsh species while Owens Lake has square miles of precious shorebird habitat. [Audubon members help monitor](#) both of these areas and collect bird data that helps in supporting proper management and protection. The chapter also leads [field trips](#) along the Owens River and out on to Owens Lake.



*Michael Prather Paddling through Lower Owens River Tules*

## December Program Continued

The Lower Owens River (LOR) alone has 62 miles of channel! Upstream of the LOR are many more miles with nesting Willow Flycatchers and Blue Grosbeaks. Owens Lake currently has literally square miles of shorebird habitat and ponds. The population of migrating birds there has exploded. In April of this year [birders recorded 115,000 birds at Owens Lake in one day!](#)

Michael Prather has been teaching about Owens Lake, organizing Owens Lake Big Days, and his Facebook name is even Owens Lake. He's been honored, along with Pete Pumphrey, as an Audubon volunteer. He has participated (also along with Pete) in the Owens Lakebed Planning process, giving important input about the habitat potential in this returning wildlife heritage site. Mike should need no introduction to ESAS members, but in case you've missed it, here are some articles about him and his work:

[The evangelist of Owens Lake birds](#) (Audublog, June 20th, 2013, by Garrison Frost)

[Audubon volunteers recognized](#) (Audublog, July 30th, 2013, by Andrea Jones)



*Mike Prather and Peter Pumphrey were honored with the the 2013 William Dutcher Award for the Pacific Flyway for their dedicated volunteer work at Owens Lake Important Bird Area*

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## No More Sage Sparrows in Inyo County . . . or Mono County . . . or anywhere else!!!

**By Tom and Jo Heindel**

Many of us have enjoyed walking through sagebrush or desert scrub habitats and catching a glimpse of a small sparrow running ahead of us with its tail cocked up looking like a miniature thrasher. This sparrow is effective at keeping bushes between themselves and us, allowing only brief looks of a scurrying bird. Between February and June, depending on latitude and elevation, they ascend to the top of Sagebrush, Salt-bush, or other plants to sing and then are more observable. We will still get to see this ground- and sage-loving sparrow but they have had a legal name change complicated by the fact that "Sage" Sparrow is now two species!

Ornithological taxonomists devote themselves to trying to understand the order in which birds evolved. They study the classification of birds based on phylogeny, or evolutionary history. The American Ornithologists' Union is the official North American organization that promotes and evaluates professional bird research. The Checklist Committee is a subgroup of the AOU, composed of about a dozen scientists, who evaluate the work and recommendations of researchers to determine if the taxonomic status of a species, or other taxon, should be changed. They listen to pro and con arguments, consult with world recognized authorities, and then vote to accept or reject the recommended change in classification. Doctors Ned Johnson and Carla Cicero, of U.C. Berkeley, have studied the Sage Sparrow in the Eastern Sierra region for decades. Their data, findings, and conclusions formed the foundation on which this change was based.



*Bell's Sparrow. Photograph by Brian Small.*

## Sage Sparrows Continued

Most birds were named centuries ago, some decades ago, primarily based on size, shape, structure, plumage, vocalization, ecology, etc., all external characteristics. Then, with the advance of scientific technology and the understanding of mitochondrial DNA, relationships were revealed that were not obvious based on external characteristics. It has been decided that the species we called "Sage" Sparrow is really two species, Sagebrush Sparrow and Bell's Sparrow. They are very similar in physical characteristics but significantly different in cellular characteristics. Sagebrush Sparrow, *Artemisiospiza nevadensis*, was formerly considered a subspecies of Sage Sparrow but is now recognized as a full species. The other Eastern Sierra "Sage" Sparrow is now conspecific with the coastal Bell's Sparrow and is the subspecies *Artemisiospiza belli canescens*.

The Sagebrush Sparrow breeds over much of the Great Basin, east of the Cascades and Sierra Nevada and west of the Rocky Mountains. They breed in Mono County with a few breeding records in northern Owens Valley near Bishop and winter in the southeastern California deserts and central Nevada south to Mexico, and western Texas. The Bell's Sparrow, subspecies *A.b. canescens*, breeds in central interior California, in the southern San Joaquin Valley (including bordering mountains; southwestern Merced to Tulare, Kern, and Ventura Counties), Inyo district (Benton southward), and western and southern borders of the Mojave Desert (east to San Bernardino Mountains) with limited southward dispersal in winter to southwestern California, northeastern Baja California, and southwestern Arizona (AOU 5th Edition).

All serious birders should know the status and distribution of bird species. During the breeding season, April through early August, birders looking for Sagebrush Sparrow should visit Mono County, beware the southern boundary and lower elevations near Benton, and if looking for Bell's Sparrow visit Inyo County, beware the northern boundary! Identifying Sagebrush Sparrows in Mono County is ostensibly easy. All year, no matter when, if you see what you used to call a Sage Sparrow just add another syllable, Sagebrush Sparrow, and you are finished. End of problem.

But if you are birding in Inyo County it gets more complicated. You need to know where you are and what the date is! As already noted, April through mid August the Bell's Sparrow is breeding throughout most of Inyo County BUT there are a few records of Sagebrush Sparrow breeding near Bishop and one record near Independence. So bird south of Independence and east of the Owens Valley and be prepared to tick off another Inyo County species! But wait, what



*Bell's Sparrow. Photograph by Bob Steele.*



*Bell's Sparrow. Photograph by Bob Steele.*



*Sagebrush Sparrow. Photograph by Brian Small.*

## *Sage Sparrows Continued*

is the date? If it is getting late in August, the highly migratory Sagebrush Sparrow is moving south and arriving in the same areas where the Bell's Sparrow breeds! Some breeding Bell's Sparrows remain in the county and others move south. Winter specimen data from Inyo County has yet to be found. In 1903-04, J. Mailliard and J. Grinnell conducted winter surveys of birds near Victorville, San Bernardino County, just south of Inyo County, and found that the two, then subspecies, were in equal numbers (Condor 7:76).

From late August through winter to April, birders in Inyo County must exercise great caution in determining whether it is a Sagebrush or Bell's Sparrow that is being observed. We all have a great opportunity to help science discover which species is present in Inyo County in winter and in what proportions. Dr. Ned Johnson told us that many individual birds cannot be safely identified in the field... but that many, with good, lengthy views are field identifiable. Recently we spent a little time at Dirty Socks Hot Spring, at the south tip of Owens Lake, looking for "Sage" Sparrows since they are usually numerous there in winter. They did not disappoint! We saw eight birds and got very good views, and photographs, of two birds. We are comfortable that they showed the physical characteristics of Sagebrush Sparrows. The others were too distant or too briefly seen to be sure, so they were UFOs. What could be more fun than to take a chair, scope, and camera to a place where these "new" birds are and work on them?! That's a rhetorical question... you don't need to answer!

So what are the distinguishing characteristics of each taxon? Sagebrush Sparrow is larger, paler, has a weakly defined malar stripe, and the middle of the back is more obviously streaked. They also have a longer wing chord (measurement from shoulder to primary tip) that often can be seen in a longer primary extension. The Bell's Sparrow subspecies found in Inyo County is smaller, darker, has a strongly marked malar stripe, and the middle of the back is weakly streaked. It also has a shorter wing chord that usually makes for a shorter primary extension. This last characteristic is given with the caveat that individual variation, feather wear, posture, and viewing angle can effectively make the primary extension less than helpful.

Peter Pyle has a wonderful article that beautifully shows, with photographs, the comparisons between these two taxa at <<http://www.sibleyguides.com/wp-content/uploads/On-separating-Sagebrush-and-Bells-Sparrows.pdf>>. Very helpful are the photographs of specimens in fresh molt (September and after) and others in worn plumage (April and after). We suggest you download and print this package and use it as you look at photographs and the birds in the field in trying to match up what you see with his answer key.

The photos used in this article are from Brian Small and Bob Steele. For further visual help, visit these two



*Sagebrush Sparrow. Photograph by Brian Small.*



*Sagebrush Sparrow. Photograph by Bob Steele.*



*Sagebrush Sparrow. Photograph by Bob Steele.*

## *Sage Sparrows Continued*

stunning websites at <[www.bobsteelephoto.com](http://www.bobsteelephoto.com)> and <[briansmallphoto.com](http://briansmallphoto.com)> for more images of Sagebrush and Bell's Sparrow and a ton of other species! For audio help and practice we suggest visiting the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology at <[macaulaylibrary.org](http://macaulaylibrary.org)> and Search: Sagebrush Sparrow (25 recordings April-July) and Bell's Sparrow (10 recordings). The coastal subspecies of Bell's Sparrow is well represented but the interior, *A.b. canescens*, has only three recordings: ML 44850 from 48km north of Mojave 8 March, ML 28318 in Antelope Valley 18 March, and ML 22854 at Little Lake 20 May.

Be prepared to see "Sage" Sparrows in the field that do not seem to fit either new taxon. Some individuals may show darker back streaks and the malar looks too dark or the back streaks are pale and so is the malar stripe. Maybe next year you'll have more experience with Sagebrush and Bell's Sparrows, and we will all have learned more, and we will all have fewer UFOs. Remember, if you feel you can name every *Artemisiospiza* you see, Ned Johnson's spirit will be looking over your shoulder and lamenting our amateur incursions into something vitally important!

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## The 32nd Annual Bishop Christmas Bird Count

**Saturday, December 14th**

*"Open" the gift of birds this season...*

The 32nd annual Bishop [Christmas Bird Count](#) (CBC) is Saturday, December 14th, 2013. All skill levels are invited to participate. The CBC is an important citizen-science effort to census all birds in the Bishop area. Results show long term population trends and shifting demographics. Plus, it's a lot of fun! Consider joining us for this year's CBC.

Please RSVP as soon as possible to Chris Howard at [chris93514@gmail.com](mailto:chris93514@gmail.com), (760) 873-7422 (home), or (760) 920-2845 (cell), to join a team and let him know if you prefer a specific area or teammate. He would like to assign areas well in advance to give you a chance to scout. If you would prefer to be a feeder-watcher, as opposed to covering an area, please let him know.



Our tally has topped the century mark nine years in a row; will it this year?

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## January COSA Bird Walk for all Levels

**Saturday, January 11th, jointly led by Audubon Board Members**

The Bishop Paiute Tribe is developing their Conservation Open Space Area (COSA) for wildlife and for the community to use for recreation and education. In January, Audubon will hold our monthly Bird Walk and Census on Saturday the 11th. We'll be keeping species lists and observing behavior as well as identifying birds, for the purpose of creating bird lists for the site. Come and check out the new COSA and help census the birds that are using the area.

## *COSA Field Trip Continued*

All are welcome - these walks are for birders of ALL LEVELS, beginners included! We will bring extra binoculars and field guides to share.

Please meet at 8:30am at the BLM/Forest Service Building on West Line Street in Bishop. Contact Jenny Richardson for more information, or if you are interested in leading a future monthly walk: [jennyn63@gmail.com](mailto:jennyn63@gmail.com) or call 760-920-8541.

Note: There will not be a December COSA walk, as the area will be included in the Christmas Bird Count census. If you would like to volunteer for the Christmas Bird Count, please see the article on page 5, and contact Chris Howard to help volunteer. Monthly COSA walks will resume in January, see previous info above.

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## **Check Out the Beautiful New ESAS Tee Shirts!**

### **New Tee Shirts with New Logo Make Great Christmas Gifts!**

We now have a selection of new teeshirts with our beautiful new Black-billed Magpie Logo. Tee shirts are available at Spellbinder Books on Main Street in Bishop, and come in an assortment of sizes and colors. Our new logo was designed by [Logan Parsons](#), scientific illustrator. We are quite pleased with the Black-billed Magpie, Mount Tom, and the shape of the Magpie which represents the [Sierra wave](#). Check out all the beautiful tee shirt colors available below! We also have some tanks and four colors in long-sleeved tees.

