

THE SIERRA WAVE

EASTERN SIERRA AUDUBON SOCIETY

ESAS Website: www.csupomona.edu/~larryblakely/ESAS/ ES Bird Sightings: www.wmrs.edu/birds/

MEETINGS

Second Wednesday of the month, September through June, 7:00 PM, usually at the White Mountain Research Station (3 mi. East of Bishop on East Line St.) *Check local news media for possible changes.*

Evening Programs

Evening programs will be preceded by (1) announcements of interest to the membership, and (2) recent bird sightings and other news on the local natural history scene. Come prepared to participate!

November 14

Refreshments: TBA

Main Program: Sacha Heath, a biologist with Point Reyes Bird Observatory (PRBO), will present a slide program on a three-year bird study, entitled,

“Songbird Monitoring of the Riparian Communities in the Eastern Sierra Nevada and Western Great Basin Region”. Sacha has been heading up this study, with a substantial field crew of interns and volunteers, using a system of point count transects, mist-netting, territory mapping and nest searching to discern the story of songbird use of riparian drainages along the western edge of the Owens Valley and Mono Basin. There are a number of partners involved who have helped with volunteer hours and monetary donations, of which Eastern Sierra



Pencil and clipboard ready, Jim Parker awaits the call or sight of an Eastern Sierra songbird, during one of the PRBO surveys. Jim & Debby were ESAS volunteers in Sacha's study.

Audubon is one. We are especially interested in her findings in relation to the impacts of brown-headed cowbirds to our region's neo-tropical migrators and look forward to hearing her results. Come and learn about this first rate research project, which could be one of the most inclusive bird research projects ever done in our area.

December 12

December Potluck: Bring a dish to share, and your plate, glass, and tableware. **Meet at 6 PM in the Dining Room.**

Main Program: Saving Nevada's "Other" Lake. Lou Thompson of the Walker Lake Working Group will present a slide show on **"The history of Walker Lake, the problems it now faces, and the efforts to preserve it"**. Walker Lake, a remnant of ancient Lake Lahontan and one of only two lakes of its kind in the western hemisphere, is a Globally Important Bird Area that is home to thousands of birds dependent on the fish in the lake and the ecosystem that provides a permanent residence, a summer home, or a stopover on their annual migrations. These birds include thousands of Western and

Clark Grebes, Great Blue Herons, Ibises, Snowy Plovers, White Pelicans, cormorants, geese, ducks, and the largest congregation of Common Loons west of the Mississippi. Like its sister lake, Mono Lake, Walker Lake is threatened with the collapse of its entire ecosystem due to upstream diversions of the water that feeds it.



For more info on the WLWG, check out their website (source of this picture): <http://www.walkerlakenevada.com/wl1.htm>

Chapter Notes

NEW MEMBERS

A warm Eastern Sierra Audubon welcome to the following new, transfer and returning members:

Carol Wells – Bishop

Nathaniel Williams – Bishop

Jenee Butera – Bishop

M. Stigliano-Stormo – Lone Pine

Ron Schaup – Big Pine

Cannon-Tulloch – Bishop

Barbara Dunson – Bishop

Pamela Cooper - Bishop

COOKIES, COOKIES, COOKIES

We need someone to volunteer to work with Sally Gaines to arrange for refreshments for Audubon general meetings. The job involves recruiting members and friends to bring goodies to the meeting. We will take care of tea, coffee, and juice. Since December and June meetings are dinner potlucks and Dorothy Burnstrom has



adopted February so she can bake Valentine cookies, the cookies team would be responsible for September, October, November, January, March, April and May – only seven meetings. Since Sally lives in Mammoth Lakes, she will not be able to come down the hill for meetings during storm periods and needs back up. If you can help, call Joan Benner @ 938-2929.

ANNOUNCEMENT

The sixth annual San Diego Bird Festival will be held February 7-10, 2002. There will be trips and tours, on land and on the sea, including overnight bird-watching outings to Northern Baja California. For more information, contact Nature Festivals of San Diego, P.O. Box 120426, Chula Vista, CA 91912, phone (619) 429-5378. Their website: www.flitetours.com/festival.htm

Newsletter Information

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The newsletter is sent to all Audubon Society members in our area. Non-members may receive the newsletter for \$6.00 annually (please send checks to the Membership Chair). Articles for the newsletter, or comments on it, should be sent to the editor (addresses above).

The newsletter is published in September, November, January, March, and May. Deadline for copy is 10 days before the month of publication.

Field Trips

CALENDAR

by *Chris Howard*
Field Trip Coordinator

Saturday, November 3rd – Highway Clean-up. Meet at Toms Place at 8:00AM for breakfast; clean-up starts at 9:00AM. Call John or Ros at 938-2023 for more info.

Saturday, December 1st – Crowley Reservoir Winter Birding – This is a great chance to see Bald Eagles, geese, and wintering ducks. Meet behind the Wye Shell gas station at 9:00AM to carpool. Bring binoculars, scopes, water, lunch, and wear clothes for COLD weather. Leader: Jon Dunn. Call Chris for more information at 873-7422.

Saturday, December 15th – Bishop Christmas Bird Count – Come see the wintering birds of the Bishop area. Last year we tallied 100 species. All levels of birdwatchers are invited to participate. Contact Chris at 873-7422 if interested in participating. There will be an organizational meeting held at Chris' place on Thursday, December 13 at 6:30PM.

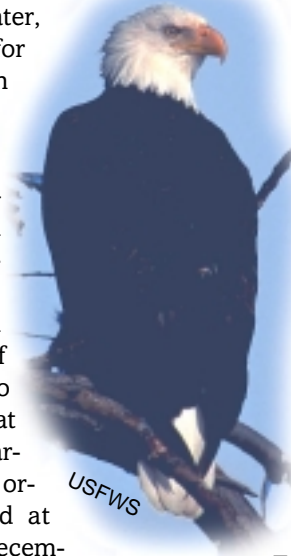
Sunday, December 16th – Lone Pine Christmas Bird Count – Mike Prather has a great count in the southern Owens Valley. Call Mike at 876-5807 for more information.

Ed. Note: A CBC for Walker Lake has been tentatively scheduled for Dec. 28; however, the Army Ammunition Storage Depot which controls 2/3 of the lake has closed their area to visitors, so it is uncertain if a CBC will be possible there. Perhaps information will be available at our December meeting. Thanks to Carolyn Gann for this news.

Friday, January 4th – Death Valley Christmas Bird Count – You can't beat a balmy day of birding in Death Valley when it's wintry in the eastern Sierra. Call Mike Prather at 876-5807 to help out.

Saturday, January 12th – Hawks, Hawks, and more Hawks – Join Earl Gann and his traditional driving tour to see the hawks, falcons, and eagles on the way to Benton. Besides birds of prey, this is also a great trip to see flocks of hundreds of Horned Larks and Mountain Bluebirds. Meet at 9:00AM behind the Wye Shell gas station in Bishop to carpool. Should last until mid-afternoon. Bring binoculars, water, lunch, and dress for the elements. Call Chris at 873-7422 with questions.

Saturday, February 16th – Furnace Creek Birding – President's Weekend – It's not too early to make camping reservations at Furnace Creek Campground (800) 365-2267. Campsites fill up quickly. Meet at the Furnace Creek golf course parking lot at 8:00AM for a morning of desert oasis birding. Contact Chris at 873-7422 for more info.



Conservation

OWENS VALLEY DEVELOPMENTS

by *Mike Prather*

Lower Owens River DEIR/S Delayed Once Again, Sigh!

Originally due out in June 2000, the Draft EIR/S (Federal money and local money make the document serve dual purposes for NEPA and CEQA) for the Lower Owens

River Project is now set to be released Dec. 18, 2001. The frustration over how little commitment Los Angeles has for this huge mitigation stemming from the 1997 Long-Term Water Agreement between Inyo County and Los Angeles can barely be expressed. With a deadline of June 2003 for water to begin flowing in 60 miles of the Lower Owens River, it doesn't seem possible that this date can be met. One wonders if the December date is a dream? The delay

falls squarely on the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power because of its 11th hour insistence on tripling the size of the project's pumpback station that will return river water to the aqueduct. The larger pump is a unilateral change in the Water Agreement with Inyo county and will prevent large spring runoff flows from reaching the 1,200 acres of delta wetlands. There is also concern that there might be new well fields put in that would take advantage of the larger pumpback station. Because of disagreement over the size of the pump station, Los Angeles simply quit working on the project entirely for a year.

Eastern Sierra Audubon has had a long standing interest in the Lower Owens River rewatering since it will create 60 miles of rich riparian habitat in an arid environment. What a magnet for birds this area will be. In addition to riparian habitat, the Lower Owens River Project also calls for a more active management of grazing in the river area that will help the new willow and cottonwood trees to succeed in growing to maturity. With 40 cubic feet of water per second flowing year round maybe even canoes will float along on parts of it looking for rails and bitterns?



Least Bittern, photo by Andrew Kirk

Water to Begin Flowing on Owens Lake

Starting in October, shallow flooding for dust control will begin on 10 square miles of Owens Lake. Auduboners who bird Owens Lake can't wait for spring of 2002 when we will search for migrating shorebirds of many species who will hopefully land to rest and feed on the abundant brine flies in the shallow flood zones. Starting in March and April birders will survey the lake's surface to see if the rich bird life that once appeared each spring and fall will reappear. Eastern Sierra Audubon worked hard to have Owens Lake designated in 2000 as a Nationally Significant Important Bird Area by the National Audubon Society. The lake was so designated due to the thousands of migrating shorebirds that use its resources during migration and also because the lake is the largest inland breeding site for the Snowy Plover. Look for Eastern Sierra Audubon fieldtrips to Owens Lake next spring and

fall. For information on birding Owens Lake visit the chapter's website or contact Mike Prather at 876-5807 or prather@qnet.com

Eastern Sierra Birding Trail

Work continues by the Eastern Sierra Audubon Society, the Owens Lake Committee and the Mono Lake Committee on an Eastern Sierra Birding Trail map. The map will be for use by visitors as they drive in the Eastern Sierra. With fifty stops from Haiwee Reservoir in the south to Bridgeport Reservoir in the north, the birding trail will be one of the best in the country. It will include information of locations, seasons to visit and what species of birds to look for. The efforts hope to educate the public to the importance of birds in the Eastern Sierra and elsewhere. With an appreciation of birds, citizens are more likely to support protection of the habitat that supports those bird species.

The project also works as a bridge between the birding community and the business community and allows us to work toward common goals of enticing visitors to our area and also in sparking a sensitivity to birds. Look for the Eastern Sierra Birding Trail in late winter or early spring.

JUNIPER FLAT

CNPS Bristlecone Chapter urges help

Astronomers who previously attempted to build a radio observatory at Upper Harkless Flat have now stated that a site they have named "Juniper Flat" is their preferred alternative. Unfortunately, this site shares much in common with Upper Harkless: it is an undisturbed, weed-free basin with sage brush and winterfat, and habitat for numerous species listed by the California Native Plant Society. The Bristlecone Chapter of CNPS recently sent a letter to Inyo National Forest Supervisor Jeff Bailey opposing any management which would compromise the ecological integrity of the site. If you are not familiar with the area, please visit the site and consider whether it should be sacri-

ficed to astronomy. A map and directions to the site are on the Bristlecone Chapter's website at www.bristleconecnps.org/conservation.

Kathy Duvall

IT'S A WILD LIFE

by Joy Fatoooh
BLM Biologist

Don't Try This (... if you're daft enough to want to)

Night before last, I put on seven layers of clothes and my best binoculars as the sun went down. When my coworkers arrived at our meeting place I swung my pack and my boom box with the broken antenna into the back of the pickup. We admired the colors of the sunset and the aspen groves until we were joined by our colleague Tim Taylor from the Department of Fish and Game. We arranged our lights and nets and at full dark, under the invisible new moon, Terry began driving slowly up a dirt road with his headlights off.

Steve and I took up our familiar stance, leaning against the cab. Tim squeezed in beside us. Steve propped his binoculars atop a million-candle-power spotlight and swung a beam out into the sagebrush.

"Do you tell the warden when you're going to be doing this?" our Fish and Game colleague asked.

"There's a warden up here? There wasn't when we did this before."

"Is now. Since about two months ago."

"That's okay," Steve joked, "give him some practice at felony arrests. Yeah, we'll tell him next time."

The light swept the hills on both sides of us. "Pretty labor intensive," Tim observed after about an hour. I agreed. "Beats watching TV, though," Steve remarked. I agreed.

"Wait - is that one?" Tim asked. "I thought I saw shine."

"If you see it without looking right over the light, it's probably something else," I said. "They're really hard to spot." The others kept us entertained: "Rabbit," we'd say when we caught ruby red eye shine. "That's a

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‘yotie,’ when we picked up sapphire blue. We saw a herd of deer like a string of Christmas lights, eyes all glowing different colors as they swung their heads to watch us pass. But we were looking for gold.

We didn’t find it. At nine we dropped Tim off at his truck, cold and tired – he had to go to work early the next morning. When we met up with him again last night we told him, “We got two females after you left. Chased four, got two.”

“Sure,” he said, “I’ve heard those stories before.” While we waited for the last light to fade from the horizon I asked if Terry and Steve had briefed him on what we do when we find one. They hadn’t. Once I’d filled him in he believed us even less. I had to agree, it’s pretty bizarre.

We crept along for hours, sweeping the sage with light. We yawned. Tim and Steve swapped hunting stories on the theme of “The coldest I’ve ever been....” I propounded inane and wildly speculative hypotheses like my one about left-handed birds. When we hit a pocket of super-chilled air we groped for wisps of warmth leaking from the cab. Inside, toasty but bored, Terry ran the heater and listened to talk radio.

Steve rapped twice on the roof of the cab. The truck halted. Steve peered intently. “There’s one, I think. Probably a male.”

I got behind him on tiptoe and raised my binoculars over his shoulder. “If it’s a bird it’s a male,” I agreed, gauging the size of the blinking yellow dot. I whispered through the truck window, “Got one.”

Terry emerged silently, hefted a heavy pack onto his back and picked up a portable spotlight in one hand and my boom box in the other. Steve gave the truck spotlight to Tim who trained it on our quarry. I picked up both long-handled nets and handed one to Steve. Terry took off across the sagebrush with his long stride, and Steve and I scurried just behind in our accustomed positions, me on the left, Steve on the right.

Within range, Terry turned on his spotlight and pushed the boom box switch to FM. Ah! – static at full volume – the sound of adrenaline! Soon I could see that this one was right-handed. More often than not they’re looking toward me and Steve nabs them, but this one was going to be mine.

Dazzled and disoriented, unable to discern shapes or footsteps, a male sage grouse the size of a big rooster watched us approach. We were three steps away when he stretched up his neck and nervously made as if to take off. Now! – I thrust my net straight forward,



Male Sage Grouse
www.zooweb.net

scooped it over him and clapped it to the ground.

A contained flurry of feathers erupted. Steve dove onto it and, through the net, gently but firmly pressed the bird’s wings to his sides. I added my hands to the pile and between the two of us we got him out from under the net and nestled snugly but unwillingly against Steve’s chest.

Meanwhile Terry had pulled a radio receiver and several small plastic bags from his pack. “Big juvenile male,” he noted softly as he selected a tiny collar fitted with a radio transmitter the size of a nickel. He pulled off the magnet that keeps it switched off when not in use and read a three-digit number to me. I dialed the number into the receiver and turned it on just long enough to confirm a strong “Beep!”

I wrapped the collar around the bird’s neck. He thrashed; Steve adjusted his grip. “Name?” I whispered as I slid a tiny crimping sleeve onto the slender collar and tried the fit with a finger between collar and neck.

“Bad Boy,” Terry suggested as the grouse thrashed again.

“Aw, he’s not *bad*! Besides, we’ve been giving all the juveniles names that start with J.”

“Okay, then, Jack.”

“Jack for short,” I agreed, and Terry articulated what it was short for – but I won’t repeat it here.

Terry, with wire cutters, executed the crimp. Steve pointed Jack in an obstacle-free direction. Jack walked a few steps and then flew. Terry muttered as he wrote in a notebook: “Released... in... good... condition.”

I turned to Tim, who had caught up to watch the proceedings. “Believe us now?”

“Nah – you planted him!”

Thinking it looked like a good area, we walked and spotted on foot, caught and collared an adult male, and let another go without approaching when we saw it was close enough to a fence that it might flush into the barbed wire. Two more Bodie Hills sage grouse for us to track: if they live a few months and if we get enough snow, we might learn where their critical wintering areas are. Back at the truck we took a break and gazed up into the star-filled sky.

“Look: three jets all in a row,” someone pointed out. “San Francisco to Denver.” We watched them blink their way through the night. “Pretty amazing concept: trusting your life to a metal cylinder at 30,000 feet,” Tim said. We talked about cramped seats and crowded airports and agreed we were glad we weren’t among the people who have to fly on business two or three times a week.

“I guess,” I said, “there are people who wouldn’t want to tromp around in the sagebrush at midnight.”

“Probably some of them are up there,” Tim said. We gazed at the flashing lights.

“That’s okay,” Steve said. “I’m glad they’re up there – if they’re happy. If everyone’s happy, I’m happy.”

Birding

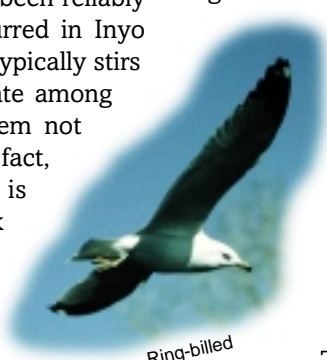
GULLS OF INYO COUNTY

by Tom & Jo Heindel

Eleven species of gulls have been reliably documented as having occurred in Inyo County. This group of birds typically stirs strong feelings of love or hate among birders. Those who love them not always began that way, and, in fact, appreciation of the group is gained only after much work and effort.

Adults of all species are straight forward given good angles and long views. With attention paid to bill, leg, and eye colors, mantle shade, wing tip pattern and overall size of the bird, one usually can correctly assign a name.

Birds in sub-adult or heavily worn plumages are not for the faint-hearted or inexperienced. Even the experts are in disagreement over which marks are diagnostic for identification. And to complicate an already complex situation is the fact that gulls hybridize producing a myriad of muddled birds. That said, there are some sub-adults that are distinguished by marks that easily select them out from the rest.



Ring-billed



California

Almost 98 percent of all Inyo gulls are either RING-BILLED or CALIFORNIA GULLS. If one spends time comparing their renderings

in the two top field guides, Sibley's Guide to Birds and National Geographic Society's Birds of North America, correct identification of almost all Inyo gulls is possible. Both species are commonly seen in spring and fall and may be encountered in numbers at any time of the year.

The third most abundant species of gull in the county is the BONAPARTE'S GULL which is fairly common in spring and uncommon in fall. Some first summer birds, in non-breeding plumage, spend the summer in Inyo. The next most abundant is FRANKLIN'S GULL which is uncommon in spring and rare in fall. SABINE'S GULL, one of the easiest to identify because of its unique wing pattern (3 triangles: white, black, and gray), is rare to very uncommon in fall and is known only once in spring when an adult was found at Owens Lake 3 May 1995.

The remaining six species are extremely rare and have been found just a few times in the county. The HERRING GULL has been recorded about 18 times from February to June but most records are in late fall. The HEERMAN'S GULL has been documented

only three times, twice in October and once in April. The THAYER'S GULL has also been documented three times, twice in October and once in November. The GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULL has been found twice, in late November and mid December. The only GLAUCOUS GULL was at Tinemaha Reservoir 23-25 December 1990 and the only WESTERN GULL was at Owens Lake 14 - 24 September 2000.

Based on data from contiguous counties or Nevada, there are six species that could occur in Inyo County, and maybe already have. These are Laughing Gull, Little Gull, Mew Gull, Yellow-footed Gull, Lesser Black-



Glaucous-winged

backed Gull, and Black-legged Kittiwake. They are awaiting their appointment with a prepared birder who recognizes and documents their occurrence in the county. An additional be-on-the-lookout has been issued for a Red-legged Kittiwake reported once in Nevada.

Late fall is the perfect time to add to the county's complement of gulls, so spend a few hours with bird identification books and report to your nearest reservoir or sewer pond!

A BIRD CALENDAR

When the phoebes return (not from the moon!) it's time to plant peas

In his wonderful and enduring "Travels", William Bartram digressed from describing his years-long sojourn in the Southeast during the mid 1770s to discuss bird migration. He wrote, "There may perhaps be some persons who consider this enquiry not to be productive of any real benefit to mankind, and pronounce such attention to natural history merely speculative, and only fit to amuse and entertain the idle virtuoso; how-

ever the ancients thought otherwise: for, with them, the knowledge of the passage of birds was the study of their priests and philosophers, and was considered a matter of real and indispensable use to the state, next to astronomy; as we find their system and practice of agriculture was in a great degree regulated by the arrival and disappearance of birds of passage; and perhaps a calendar under such a regulation at this time, might be useful to the husbandman and gardener. But . . . the ancients were . . . erroneous in their conjectures concerning what became of birds, after their disappearance. . . some imagined they went to the moon: . . . [others] supposed that they retired to caves and hollow trees. . . : and even

at this day, very celebrated men have asserted that swallows (hirundo) at the approach of winter, voluntarily plunge into lakes and rivers . . . where they continue overwhelmed by ice in a torpid state, until the returning summer warms them again into life; . . ."

"The pewit . . . ['These faithful messengers of spring', wrote Thomas Nuttall; current name, Eastern Phoebe] is the first bird of passage which appears in the spring in Pennsylvania, which is generally about the first, or middle of March; and then wherever they appear, we may plant peas and beans . . . [etc] . . . in the open grounds without fear or danger from frosts; . . ."

Larry B.

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Blakely

Two American White Pelicans share a rock at Walker Lake, June 8, 1997. The December program will be on efforts to save Walker Lake.

Gulls of Inyo (now's the time to look for them), Owens Valley conservation developments, How to radio-collar Sage Grouse (isn't easy!), Programs & Fieldtrips