



## 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.

*ESAS Website:* ESAudubon.org *ES Bird Sightings:* ESAudubon.org/birds/

## 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!**

**November 10**

### **Ancient History of the Mono Lake Committee: The First Ten Years**

How do a handful of biologists start a grassroots conservation group from scratch? Let Sally Gaines tell the tale of the beginning days and all they had to learn about politics, legal proceeding, fundraising and publicity while keeping their initial ideals. This slide show details the first decade of the MLC, 1978-1988, when everyone looked a lot younger.



David Gaines afloat

Mono Lake Committee

**December 8**

### **A Month in the Canadian Arctic: Canoeing the Coppermine River**



Join outstanding local photographer John Dittli as he and three friends embark on a 350 mile journey paddling from the headwaters of the Coppermine River to the Arctic Ocean, photographing the incredible landscapes and wildlife of the short northern summer.

### **December 8 Holiday Potluck**

Come early to the December 8 program and bring a dish to share and a complete place setting. Plan to eat at 6:00 pm in the White Mountain Research Station dining room. After dessert, there will be a fundraising raffle.

## **A Past President's Message – Croc Rock, First Day of Fall**

I took a ramble, on the first day of Fall, across the land to the north of us, which is dominated by Blackbush, indicating dryer and poorer soil in Big Sagebrush country. Blackbushes appear to be just tangled bundles of brittle dead twigs this time of year. I headed for Croc Rock, which in the afternoon shadows clearly resembles the head of a crocodile, so much so that anyone seeing it would immediately recognize the form.

Near Croc Rock, up against a more ordinary granite boulder washed out of Rawson Creek canyon in ages past, I inspected the little colony of Coville's Lip Fern which we discovered many years ago. It occurs in a line about a yard long under the eastward-leaning boulder's eastern base. This uncommon fern is a delight to see in spring. The many, crowded, 4 or 5 inch fronds, arising directly from the underground stems, resemble nothing so much as tiny green two-dimensional Christmas trees, and the colony, a Lilliputian two-dimensional forest. On this day, however, there was no green, only dull silver and bronze.

In fact, there seemed to be little evidence of life anywhere on my ramble. I did see a couple of very small Side-blotched Lizards, and noted some fresh deer tracks and droppings. Here and there a favored rock bore bright patches of variously colored lichens, accompanied, in

crevices, by small moss mounds, dust-dry and dark as charcoal.

But then I was treated to the sight of a Sage Sparrow, brightly darting from one all-gray Blackbush to another, vigorously flicking its black-topped tail; clearly it was in no dormant state. In fact, I imagined it to be reveling in such a beautiful first-of-Fall day, when it had its vast domain seemingly all to itself, and its Winter nemesis, the White-crowned Sparrow, had yet to show up. I say nemesis because, so it seems to me, when the White-crowns have arrived, and thoroughly taken over the countryside, the Sage Sparrows are more subdued. Perhaps like residents of a small southern Arizona community after the snowbirds settle in.

As I looked around, though – and how could I have overlooked them! – there was another, more abundant sign of life, especially around Croc Rock, in the form of the scattered Green Rabbitbrushes. While most all members of the vegetable kingdom in this realm – the Blackbush, the Cooper's Goldenbush, the California Buckwheat, the bunch grasses, and the Ephedra – had the appearance of so much dead wood and dried-up leaves, the Green Rabbitbrush was not only a vibrant green, but bursting into bloom!

**Larry Blakely**

## **December Field Trips and Events**

### **Saturday December 4 - Crowley Reservoir Winter Birding - Leader: Jon Dunn.**

This is a great chance to see Bald Eagles, geese, and wintering ducks. Meet behind the Wye Shell gas station in Bishop at 9:00AM to carpool. Bring binoculars, scopes, water, lunch, and wear clothes for COLD weather. Inclement weather moves the trip to Tinemaha Reservoir. Call Chris for more information at 873-7422.

### **Christmas Bird Counts**

Ready...Set...Go! It's CBC time again! Grab the binoculars. Let's go count some birds! The CBC is an Audubon tradition that dates back over 100 years. In the Eastern Sierra it dates back almost 25 years. As usual, we'll break into teams and enjoy a fun-filled day looking for as many bird species as possible within the pre-determined 15 mile count circles. All skill levels are encouraged to participate. It's a fun way to see new places, learn new birds, and meet new people. Plus, the post-count tally potlucks can't be beat. A \$5 participation fee covers your copy of American Birds and Audubon's compilation and database efforts. Under 18 and feeder-watchers are free. There are three Eastern Sierra CBCs:

**Bishop CBC, Saturday December 18** - contact Chris Howard, 873-7422 [choward@telis.org](mailto:choward@telis.org)

**Death Valley CBC, Sunday December 19** - contact Vicki and Gerry Wolfe, 786-2108  
[desertwolfe1@ecoisp.com](mailto:desertwolfe1@ecoisp.com)

**Mono Basin CBC, date to be announced** - contact River Gates or Chris McCreedy, 647-6109  
[h\\_river@lycos.com](mailto:h_river@lycos.com) or [cmccreedy@prbo.org](mailto:cmccreedy@prbo.org)

## Inyo County Adds Brown Pelican To its Bird List

Tom and Jo Heindel



Brown Pelican

Tom and Jo Heindel

This past summer has been a banner year for finding Brown Pelicans in the interior of the southwest U.S. Unlike American White Pelican, a common migrant through Inyo in spring and fall, the Brown Pelican prefers the coast and is very rare inland except at the Salton Sea where it is found regularly in summer and fall. This year a very successful Brown Pelican breeding season combined with a significant crash of the food supply, primarily anchovies, resulted in immature birds desperate for food dispersing inland. Rare Bird Alerts lit up with reports of birds in Arizona, New Mexico, and Mono and Inyo Counties!

There have been previous reports of Brown Pelican from Inyo County but none were photographed or documented in writing so they do not qualify as County records. In centuries past, a new species was added to the bird list of an area after it had been collected and placed in a museum. There was physical proof of the occurrence so that anyone, anytime, could examine the specimen and agree or disagree with the record. Times have changed, fortunately, and now photographs, audiotapes, videos, drawings, and/or written documentation can be submitted in lieu of a specimen and preferably by multiple observers. If the evidence is unequivocal, it becomes a scientific record. This is especially valuable when birds occur outside their known geographic or temporal range.

Credit for finding and reporting the first Inyo County Brown Pelican goes to Brad Schram who supported his observation with written documentation. Brad is an excellent and experienced birder, author of A

Birder's Guide to Southern California, and an all around good guy. On 1 July, he was driving south on Hwy 395 and as he passed Owens Lake he observed an immature Brown Pelican flying north. He lives on the coast, sees Brown Pelicans all the time and knew that they are not expected inland. He posted the sighting on Calbird, a birding bulletin board, which helped spread the word.

Because we were out of the area, we were gnashing our teeth until we could return on 6 July. The next day a visit to Tinemaha Reservoir turned up an immature Brown Pelican! Phone calls and a posting to the Eastern Sierra Birds website helped alert local birders, some of whom dropped what they were doing to drive to the reservoir to see our newest neighbor. Photographs and documentation were submitted by almost everyone who saw the bird, insuring that the "Doubting Thomases" of the future would not have any room for doubts!

To complicate the issue, Steve Holland reported an immature Brown Pelican at June Lake on 3 July. Were all three sightings of one bird? Did the Owens Lake bird go north to June Lake and then return south to Tinemaha? Or, was each a different individual? Because it is such a rare species in the Eastern Sierra one should conservatively claim only one. However, there were dozens at reservoirs in Arizona so it is not impossible that there were three birds. A similar situation occurred on 6 July 1998. A Magnificent Frigatebird was seen at Tinemaha Reservoir at the exact same minute that one was seen over Mono Lake. A few hours later one was seen at Diaz Lake. Obviously there were at least two birds but there might have been three. Again, there were frigatebirds reported outside their normal range during the same time in many parts of the state.

The sad ending to this story is that on 10 July Susan Steele found the Tinemaha Reservoir bird floating dead. Unlike its cousin, the American White Pelican who feeds by scooping fish as it swims, the Brown Pelican feeds primarily by plunge diving. This is not a good idea in shallow water reservoirs like Tinemaha. In all probability it died of starvation, but a record of its occurrence was validated by the many photographs and documentation by observers who turned an exciting personal sighting into a scientific record that will easily pass the test of time.



## Kids Meet Birds



This a Red-shouldered Hawk near its nest at the Bishop City Park, as seen by the students of the Seventh Day Adventist school on a bird walk this May, led by Debby Parker on behalf of Eastern Sierra Audubon. The art is by Jacob, a student in the class. "Super kids who all sent thank you notes to me which I really appreciated," Debby says.

## Yard Sale – No Early Birds!

The annual yard sale is an important source of income for Eastern Sierra Audubon. It will help pay for such expenses as the printing and mailing of this newsletter; meeting room rent; insurance; and enhancing our education programs with things like binoculars for student field trips. Dig through your closets, cupboards, sheds and garage for saleable items to donate to the event. All items must be priced in advance by the donor. Starting October 30th, yard sale items may be left in the car port at 388 Shepard Lane, the home of Sara Steck and Steve White. Priced items can also be dropped off at the Bill and Vivian Mitchel residence at 716 Sundown

Circle in west Bishop, at 8 AM on the morning of the sale. If you have any questions or need help with hauling items to the sale, contact Bill Mitchel at 872-4774. The sale will take place Saturday, November 6 at 8 a.m. at the Mitchel residence.

## Welcome

### New Members

#### Spring/Summer 2004

**Gail Dull – Bishop**

**Daniel Haydon – Mammoth Lakes**

**Gail K. Phillips – Bishop**

**Ed Sonnenberg – Bishop**

**Rebecca Sonnenberg – Bishop**

**Bill & Diana Stephens – Mammoth Lakes**

**Karen Arcel – Mammoth Lakes**

**Charlene Hoskins – Lone Pine**

**Alan Murdock – Bishop**

**Nick Sprague – Bishop**

**Linda Haun – Lone Pine**

**Robert Lingley – Bishop**

**Herbert London – Bishop**

**Nancy L. Owens – Bishop**

**Rosemary Thorpe – Big Pine**

**Gwen Dodson – Bishop**

## 272 pounds of trash!

That's what the folks who turned out to clean up the Bishop Creek drainage found around intake II and North Lake on Saturday, September 11th, 2004.

Sponsored by Eastern Sierra Audubon Society, Friends of the Inyo, the Inyo National Forest and Southern California Edison, the Bishop Creek cleanup was part of the 20th anniversary celebration of the California Coastal Cleanup. While the streams of the Eastern Sierra haven't run into the Pacific Ocean for quite some time now, everyone agrees that trash is trash no matter what water body it's polluting.

We found a steel door, broken bottles, cans, snack wrappers, Styrofoam worm containers, gobs of fishing line dangerously tangled up in willows and through the sagebrush, and a couple broken fishing poles. From snagging songbirds in fishing line to clogging the digestive systems of mammals big and small, careless waste has a very real and very negative impact on our local wildlife.

Thanks to all 57 volunteers who turned out on a beautiful, sunny day and raised awareness about the connection between personal responsibility for one's trash and the health of our waterways and wildlife.

## Chautauqua Redux

What do you get when you mix scientists, birders, artists, music, good food, and a whole bunch of birds? You get the 3rd Annual Mono Basin Bird Chautauqua in June 2004, an extraordinary gathering of scientists, artists, birders, and the curious. If you even had a passing interest in birds, there was something for everyone, and everyone had fun.



Rich Stallcup on a Chautauqua field trip

Chautauqua sessions included evening presentations and field trips at all hours. Some people chose to go out for a night of owl hooting, while others went to bed and got up early to catch one of the two

Thanks also to the Great Basin Bakery, Starbuck's, Von's, Wilson's Eastside Sports, Mountain Light Gallery, Companion Press, Nancy Overholtz, and Crystal Geysers for providing sustenance and raffle prizes, and Third District Inyo County Supervisor Ted Williams for deftly pulling the raffle winners.

**Paul McFarland**



“Little” Big Days. Field trips focused on a wide range of interests, from Mono Lake ecology to wildflower identification, to butterflies, to the art of field sketching. Even the birds cooperated, as if they had sent special chautauqua ambassadors to add to the celebration. Participants logged 133 species of birds—a little more than a third of the recorded species in the Mono Basin watershed.

Special events began with a reception and catered gourmet dinner on Friday and continued through the First Annual Mono Lake Wine Flight, book signings, and a Sunday concert and picnic at the Mono Lake County Park. These events provided opportunity for socializing and relaxing—a complimentary break to the scientific, artistic, and ornithological. An unforgettable bird calling contest brought out the most unusual, skilled, and humorous bird calls in the Eastern Sierra. Alan Blaver closed with a Paiute blessing and song.

About 260 people registered for the Chautauqua. The town of Lee Vining was fully booked and so was the town of June Lake. Thanks go to all the Chautauqua partners: Mono Lake Committee, Eastern Sierra Audubon, US Forest Service, Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area, PRBO Conservation Science, and California State Parks; and the many individuals who worked to make it a success. **Bartshe Miller**

## A Veery good day of bird banding River Gates

Of all the creeks in the Mono Basin, Rush Creek's sunrise view is my favorite. Early in the summer the sun rises over the mighty crest of the White Mountains and ignites the sharp gray blade of the Dana Plateau in crisp sherbet light. It is dark when Heidi Black, Leslie Slavin and I arrive and quietly begin work in the growing dawn light. Yellow Warblers can be heard from all directions counter-singing in a complex cacophony accented by the drunken song of a Black-headed Grosbeak. I trudge across Rush Creek with a bundle of steel poles on my shoulder and a bag of mist nets in hand. Setting up the nets, I chuckle to myself as the dawn chorus grows in its haphazard yet perfect unfolding. Operating a mistnetting and bird banding station is a mixed blessing that combines the privilege of studying and handling wild birds with the reality of waking up hours before the dawn for the entire summer.

Finally the sun magically lights the Dana Plateau, signaling time to open the nets. This morning we will host 30 participants in the Mono Basin Bird Chautauqua, and we hope to catch a good variety of birds. Each summer, PRBO Conservation Science operates four mistnetting and banding stations in the Mono Basin as part of a riparian songbird monitoring program initiated in 1998. Our task today is to operate the station for 5 hours, capture and release wild birds and demonstrate to our visitors the purpose of our research and conservation work.

The day's captures begin with an already banded adult male Yellow Warbler clad in brilliant yellow with deep chestnut red streaking across the breast. This individual's band number, when queried in our database, links us to the story of his life. We originally banded 221087127 in 2000 and have captured him every year since, a total of 15 times. When first captured he was determined to be an adult male by plumage and the presence of an enlarged cloaca signifying that he was actively breeding. Every year for five years, this bird had returned to Rush Creek to breed in his territory, a remarkably small area of willows on both sides of the creek.

Our pace is quick this morning. Checking the nets every 30 minutes keeps us on the move. The three banders and Chautauqua visitors split into groups, returning to the banding station with their birds. After the fourth net run, Heidi returns with a perplexed smile and tells me she has a bird that she doesn't recognize. Leslie takes the mystery bird out of the bag to reveal a thrush that neither of us recognizes either. Thus begins one of the great joys of a bird bander: figuring out what strange bird you have in your hand!



Yellow Warbler band #221087127

PRBO Science

We know that it belongs to the group of small brown spotted thrushes in the genus *Catharus*. There are five breeding species in North America, which can sometimes be impossible to identify in the field but more easily identified in the hand. We start with basic measurements, wing and tail length, but these eliminate only the Hermit Thrush. We then rely on our observational skills and those of our visitors. Everyone agrees that the eye ring is not distinctive and that the spots are unique in shape and pattern, suggesting a Veery. Heidi starts scribing notes: the bird is light rusty brown overall with a distinctive necklace of triangular spots across the upper breast. One observer thinks it's a Veery, someone else thinks it's a Swainson's Thrush, and I am holding the bird thinking, "Oh, my god, what is this?" These are moments I both cherish and abhor. If I can conclude through detailed observations and measurements that this is indeed a Veery, it would indeed be a very rare bird for California – there are currently only ten California Birds Record Committee endorsed records of this species – and an even more rare bird to the Mono Basin. Or I can be totally wrong and face the ridicule of my colleagues.

After some time, I decide that I'm not one hundred percent certain; I've never seen a Veery; and it occurs to me that we're lucky enough to have some of the finest ornithologists in California in town as presenters for the Chautauqua. Most importantly I realize it's time to release this bird. We take numerous photographs, then watch it fly away into the willows along the creek.

After banding is over, Heidi, Leslie and I have a chance to sit down together and review our notes, pictures and observations. It wasn't a Swainson's Thrush. We've all banded them enough to know it just wasn't. There was no eye ring and the spotting on the breast was different. We decide after about a half an hour of bird geek discussion that we indeed had a Veery and all we need is the okay by Rich Stallcup and Jon Dunn to make us feel sure.

That evening I track down Rich and Jon and show them the pictures and they both support our identification of the Veery. A wave of excitement and relief flows into me: our initial hunch was correct. The Veery (*Catharus fuscescens*) breeds in the northern damp deciduous forests, woodlands and riparian habitats of central British Columbia eastward to Newfoundland and southward to Pennsylvania, North Dakota, Colorado, and Oregon. Its migration follows the Central, Mississippi and Atlantic Flyways with some individuals potentially making a non-stop flight over the Gulf of Mexico en route to wintering grounds in central and south eastern Brazil. What was this individual doing in the Mono Basin in the middle of the breeding season? Perhaps more importantly, what did it do for the rest of the breeding season?

Our Veery, which if accepted will be the eleventh record in California, was a joy to experience. Sharing the thrill with Chautauqua participants made it a special morning for everyone.



The Veery with its new bracelet PRBO Science

## The New Duck

### A letter from Corey Hickey

Living at the pond next to the house here at Ione are three ducks and eight or nine geese. We feed them all chicken feed sometimes, not because they need it (they've got a pond to eat out of) but because they really like chicken feed. The ducks are usually nice and polite when we go to feed them – they only say "wack, wack, wack," in a quiet voice. The geese, however, hiss at us in a very sinister manner. Once we put the feed on the ground, the geese chase the ducks away. So, I usually hold the geese at bay while I let the ducks eat for a little while. The geese are very aggressive; they hiss at me, flap their wings, and try to get around me until I walk away. Then they walk up and, if the ducks haven't left, peck at them so they flee.

The geese are much bigger than the ducks – probably about four times the mass, so they've always been dominant. The ducks dominate each other, too; when I let the ducks eat, the two big ducks always pecked at the smallest one, so I would pour three piles so the small duck can always find some food. They'd always switch piles, not being content with what they have at the time. The little duck always got rotated.

A few weeks ago I noticed a new duck. It's small, fat, and has a white head. When I went out to feed them, the duck was standing among the geese, hissing at me just like they do. I intimidated the geese for a minute and poured four piles for the ducks. I wanted to know how the new duck fit in to the pecking order, and interestingly enough, it didn't seem to fit in the order at all. None of the ducks pecked it, and it pecked nobody – not even the only duck smaller than itself.

When I walked away and let the geese get at the food, they came flapping and running and hissing as usual and drove the three old ducks off. But the new duck stood its ground. When two geese came toward its pile, the duck looked up at them and they stopped. When the new duck wanted to eat from a different pile, it waddled over to where three geese were eating and hissed at them until they left. Wherever that little duck went, all the geese gave it room.

These days it seems to be more aggressive, and pecks at all the others. Not hard; just a little bit. It wags its tail all the time and when it wants to act threatening it makes chicken noises. I once watched it defend a pile of chicken feed from five geese by standing in the middle of the pile, pointing its bill straight up, rotating in a circle and making chicken noises.

I really wonder why the new duck gets so much respect. It's the second smallest bird out there, yet none of the others mess with it. I wondered at first if it was just because they're wary of the newcomer, but that doesn't seem to be the case anymore. I really don't know. Maybe it just has small duck syndrome and all the other birds are fooled.

## Chapter Officers

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Sage Sparrow

Larry Blakely

**A new Brown Pelican, a new Veery, an old Sage and an odd duck – *Inside!***