



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!

November 14
Owens Lake Audubon
Important Bird Area
Mike Prather

Refreshments: Joan



Black-necked Stilt, Red-necked Phalarope Mike Prather

December 12
Holiday Potluck 6 pm, Program 7 pm
Inside the Field Guide
John Muir Laws

Jack Laws, author of the popular *Sierra Birds, A Hiker's Guide*, has just published the *Laws Field Guide to the Sierra Nevada*. Lavishly illustrated with watercolors done in place, it covers mammals, birds, insects, fish, reptiles, amphibians, trees, flowers and mushrooms. Jack will discuss the years of preparing the guide and show slides from the illustrations. Laws' presentations have been a highlight of the Mono Basin Bird Chautauqua for the past two years. He is especially entertaining for children and this is a great event for the whole family.



Detail from *Townsend's in Winter*

John Muir Laws

The largest snowy plover nesting site in the state, and hosting tens of thousands of migrating shorebirds and waterfowl each year, Owens Lake is one of the most important wildlife locations in California. Audubon-California and local chapters throughout the state are partnering to protect Owens Lake's public trust wildlife populations for all Californians. By working for public access and through educational interpretive sites, Audubon plans to establish Owens Lake as a birding hotspot for everyone to visit. Mike Prather has been studying and advocating for birds at Owens Lake and throughout Owens Valley for over 10 years.

President's Message – Grant a Wish

“The river...is the living symbol of all the life it sustains or nourishes...” Chief Justice William O. Douglas
Sierra Club –v- Morton

Even though it is only November, it is time for the Eastern Sierra Audubon Society to work on its “wish list.” ***What we need is the help of our members.*** We need volunteers. There is a vacancy at the position of ***Secretary.*** The position brings with it a seat on the Board of Directors. It involves coming to the board meetings which are just before the membership meetings and taking notes for the minutes.

That's not all. Could you help our chapter continue and expand its ***bird and nature education and outreach*** to people in Inyo and Mono Counties? Can you help us connect with a school, a class, scout troop or similar organization? You would not have to invent the wheel; just work with those already involved.

Are you interested in working on a campaign to ***increase the chapter's membership and member involvement?*** Staff from California Audubon are willing to come over and help us if they have some folks with which to work.

Anyone in Mono County interested in fostering Audubon activities in the ***Mammoth, June and Lee***

Vining areas? Maybe birding activities or a discussion group? We need your help and initiative and we will give you ours.

Have you ever thought you might want to ***lead walks for beginning birders?*** Or maybe ***a walk program with a group from the Bishop Senior Center?*** We would like to make these things happen, but we need someone to lead a group maybe once a month during birding seasons. Feel more comfortable with some training as a trip leader? We can set that up.

Are you looking for a way to help friends and neighbors understand and respond to the many challenges of ***climate change?*** So are we. Let's do it together. Interested in ***gardening to provide habitat for butterflies and birds?*** So are we.

If you have ever thought of an idea to help people learn about, protect or enjoy our incredible natural resources, chances are there are other people who would be interested in the same thing. We want to get you together with those people and get the ball rolling. Contact me or any board member. Best of all, come to a membership meeting and get a discussion and some action going.

– Pete Pumphrey

December Field Trip and Christmas Bird Count

Saturday, December 1 - Winter Birding with Jon Dunn Crowley Lake in early winter is a fantastic place for a variety of gulls, ducks, eagles, swans, and geese. Plan to meet at 7:00 a.m. at the Y in Bishop or at 7:45 at the Green Church, weather permitting of course. Contact Connie at 872-4596 for further information or check the ESAS website.

See the ESAS website for other upcoming field trip announcements – ESAudubon.org

Saturday, December 15 - 26th Annual Bishop Christmas Bird Count This longstanding tradition is a great opportunity to observe wintering birds in the Bishop area and collect valuable bird census data. Anyone with an interest in birding is welcome to participate. Last year we encountered seasonal rarities such as Western Grebes, a Green Heron, an Osprey, a Rough-legged Hawk, Long-eared Owls, a Short-eared Owl, Anna's and Costa's Hummingbirds, 470 Pinyon Jays, a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, a Western Bluebird, a Yellow Warbler, a Common Yellowthroat, 4 Lark Sparrows, a White-throated Sparrow, and a Pink-sided Junco. Teams will be assembled and areas will be assigned in early November, to provide ample scouting opportunities. Ask anyone who has participated on a CBC; it's a lot of fun finding birds in the cold, then warming up at the tally potluck. If you'd like to join the fun, please contact Chris Howard at chris93514@gmail.com or 873-7422 as soon as possible.

Rather than trying to find a “thing” to give at the holidays, give your friends and family an opportunity: give a gift membership in Eastern Sierra Audubon Society. An ESAS membership opens the door to field trips, education and advocacy about wild critters and wild places all year long. You can share your enthusiasm for our places and our programs, and your gift can be the start of a lifelong process of learning about wildlife and working to protect the habitats we share. A membership form is here in the newsletter.

A History of Verdin in Inyo County

Tom and Jo Heindel

This small, charismatic, gray desert bird is North America's only representative of the Remizidae, a family of tits found throughout the world. The yellow head, chestnut shoulder patch and distinctive three-note vocalization makes this an obvious species of the drier deserts from Texas to southeastern California. Both sexes build volleyball-sized and shaped nests in mesquite trees and other thorny trees and shrubs, some used for roosting and others for nesting. These nests are often the first indication that you are in Verdin territory.

The Death Valley Expedition of 1891 recorded the "first" Verdins for Inyo County when Mr. Frank Stephens collected a male at Resting Springs 13 February 1891. This small location is a few miles north of the San Bernardino line and a few miles west of the Nevada line.

In 1917, the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at Berkeley began a project to document the vertebrates of Inyo County. Tracy I. Storer, a respected zoologist, spent part of February collecting data at Shoshone, just 15 miles northwest of Resting Springs. He found no Verdins and no nests, indicating that they had not moved beyond the original site. In April and May, Dr. Joseph Grinnell, the dean of California ornithology, surveyed birds at Furnace Creek Ranch. He found no nests and heard no vocalizations during a time when they are

extremely vocal while setting up their breeding territories.

In April 1920, Grinnell returned to the ranch, then called Greenland Ranch, for further bird research and found no Verdins.

No further work was done there until October 1933 when Grinnell returned to continue his studies and found that during the interim Verdins had colonized Furnace Creek Ranch. M. French Gilman, a maintenance supervisor and knowledgeable birder at the ranch, told Grinnell that there were Verdin nests at Shoshone as well.

The species continued at Furnace Creek Ranch and was reported again in 1961 and through the 1970s and 1980s. During this time reports came from Mesquite Springs and Scotty's Castle, north of the ranch, and breeding is regularly documented there to the present time. They moved west to Emigrant Ranger Station, Darwin Falls, Haiwee Reservoir, Little Lake and a few canyons on the southeast slope of the Sierra Nevada (e.g. Nine-mile and Sand Canyons).

Other species have forged into new breeding areas only to withdraw after a few decades or longer. It remains to be seen if this species can endure in the newly colonized areas, and what motivated this range expansion awaits answers from a future scholar.



Verdin

Jo Heindel

Little Lakes Ranch Field Trip Report

Members of the Kerncrest and Eastern Sierra Audubon groups joined together on a warm and sunny day September 28 for a rare opportunity to bird the private Great Basin Foundation hunting preserve at Little Lakes Ranch. Although birds were not abundant in total numbers (with the exception of an estimated 1500 American Coots on the lake) 70 species were logged. Notable finds included an immature Vermilion Flycatcher, Vesper Sparrow, Western Kingbird, Verdin and Vaux's Swift. A Golden Eagle and Great Horned Owl were also seen. While a Lawrence's Goldfinch was heard, a diligent search failed to locate the bird. The group also visited the spectacular BLM overlook on the lava cliff above the lake and one of several interesting petroglyph sites in the area. Many thanks to Brenda Burnett of Ridgecrest for organizing the outing and leader Susan Steele of Ridgecrest whose bird identification and locating skills added immeasurably to the outing's success. Our gratitude to the caretakers of the Little Lakes Ranch and the Great Basin Foundation for allowing us to enter their property and for the fine lunch they provided the group. – **Claus Engelhardt**

Convict Lake – Cleaned Up



The 4th annual Eastern Sierra Cleanup at Convict Lake sponsored by the California Coastal Commission on September 22nd was a great success. Despite the blustery day with rain and hail squalls, 32 volunteers showed up and picked up 106.5 pounds of trash and 75 pounds of recyclables around Convict Lake and Convict Creek; about two and a half miles of shoreline and stream banks were cleaned. The trash included a large amount of fishing line which was found stuck in bushes and in big wads along the banks, worm containers, and food wrappers. The recyclables were mostly aluminum cans and bottles, both glass and plastic. A big thank you to all the volunteers!

As of September 24 with 70% of the California cleanup sites reporting, the total number of volunteers surpassed 45,500 and more than 500,000 pounds of trash and recyclables were cleaned off beaches and waterways. Once we get all of the results it may be a record year!

Thanks go the Inyo National Forest Service, Friends of the Inyo and Eastern Sierra Audubon Society for their support, and to Great Basin Bakery for providing bagels and muffins for these hard working volunteers! – **Sara Steck**

Coming Soon: Owens Lake Big Day – April 19-20, 2008

Join us in conducting an unprecedented survey of birds at Owens Lake IBA. Come and help this Important Bird Area and the thousands of birds that have returned because of the Los Angeles Owens Lake dust control project. This is a science and social main event. Bring your binocs, scope, camera and cell phone (for rare bird alerts while on the lake) - you and your group will get your own 'slice of the lake.' An historic group photo will be taken of our 'Joseph Grinnell Bird Group.'

The Big Day is Saturday with plenty of time to chase 'rare ones' and to explore the area. A potluck and tally is planned for Saturday night. Campsites, motels and RV spots are all available. To sign up contact Mike Prather, Eastern Sierra Audubon, mprather@lonepinetv.com (760) 876-5807 Drawer D, Lone Pine, CA 93545



Farewell to Sacha, Welcome to Stella

Nearly a decade after setting up the riparian songbird study that led to establishing a fulltime presence for PRBO Conservation Science in our region, Sacha Heath decided last year to pursue a doctorate and step back from her position heading PRBO's Eastern Sierra Field Station. In the years since 1998 Sacha and her crews had gone on to collaborate with probably every major land-owning entity, wildlife management agency and bird-loving organization in the Eastern Sierra, accomplishing a wide range of studies and reporting useful and practical findings while publishing several professional papers with fascinating research results. Sacha's enthusiasm and energy supercharged the atmosphere of avian investigations, and all who worked with her knew she'd eagerly share ideas and data that would lead to better bird conservation, any time we asked.

At first Sacha alternated her new course work with bird work, but as this fall's full load of classes set in, Sacha announced that her colleague Stella Moss "will take over much of the project management and leadership responsibilities for PRBO projects that I have managed up to now." Stella, Chris McCreedy and Kristie Nelson now constitute PRBO's core Eastern Sierra team and will continue to maintain the office in Lee Vining. Chris continues leading the Willow Flycatcher project and Kristie will continue to head the California Gull project.

"Feel free to contact Stella as you have done so with me in the past," Sacha says. "She will be the PRBO contact person for contracts, future proposals, project ideas, reporting and the completion of existing projects. I will remain on PRBO's payroll on a very part time basis to assist Stella as she needs it and to wrap up existing projects."

Many of you may have already met Stella, as she began her bird career here in the Eastern Sierra. Before that, she says, "I was fascinated by the birds I observed during my time as a sea kayaking guide in Alaska and wanted to pursue this interest more as a career. PRBO's

internship program seemed the best way for me to be trained in all the field methods and learn more about songbirds." She began with nest searching on Mill and Rush creeks; proceeded to banding, point counts, spot mapping and area searches; and gradually took on more responsibilities including setting up studies and writing reports.

Join me in welcoming Stella to her new role, as we wish all the best to Sacha in her academic adventures. Sacha invites all, "Please stay in touch and feel free to continue to contact me anytime. I'd like to continue to help as I can." - **Editor**

Loss of an Old Friend

On May 1, 2007, I lost an old friend in Mammoth. I've only lived here five years, so I was acquainted with this old timer for only a short time, but every morning when I'd drive down Old Mammoth Road I'd admire this one of a kind creation. When I came home in the evening it was always there, standing high on the hill above the Historic Knight Wheel with Mammoth Mountain sitting majestically in the background. This old timer was an old, dead Red Fir tree, cut down to make way for the new development at Snowcreek VII. I realize this is progress and the development is important, but it hurt to see the old beauty cut down.

The tree can actually be seen in a younger state in old 1920 photos found down at the Hayden Cabin museum. It's in the background of some of the old Mammoth Camp photos. I imagine the tree was probably a safety hazard, although it looked to me to still be pretty solid. My guess is the wind would have blown it down eventually, maybe in another 10 years, if the chainsaw hadn't taken it down. It was just an old ugly fire hazard to most people, but there was always a lot of life around that dead tree. A couple of times each year, usually in the winter, I was privileged to spot a Bald Eagle perched on its upper branches. Almost daily there would be a Red-tailed Hawk or American Kestrel sitting up there surveying the surrounding area, and of course Ravens would often use this high perch to squawk at the world and plan their next meal. Other frequent visitors were the Woodpeckers that would spend the day drilling away at the decaying bark, trying to extract some sort of insect or grub, and flocks of Finches, Sparrows, Juncos and Blackbirds were often seen resting on its bare branches.

Where will these birds perch now that their old snag is gone? Where will the Northern Flicker make its nesting cavity? Where will the tiny Pygmy Nuthatch find its next meal? I'm sure they'll find another old dead tree, but they're getting harder to find in Mammoth. The birds and other creatures will have to go out of town, just like I will have to do to see our vanishing wildlife.

- **Ken Wells**

We Know How To Do This: California Audubon Society Assembly Report

Pete Pumphrey

Roberta and I had the good fortune to attend the Audubon California Assembly 2007 in Asilomar in early October. The assembly brought together the president of national Audubon, the staff and board of directors of Audubon California and representatives of many of the 49 local Chapters. Topics included climate change, member recruitment, land conservation, project funding, public outreach and education, and backyard habitat.

The theme of the conference was climate change and its relationship to bird populations. One presenter described the situation as one in which “the abnormal becomes the norm.” The focus: CO₂ concentrations, which had a historical maximum of 300 parts per million in the 400,000 years prior to 2000. In 2007, the level was 385ppm. The projected level in 2100, without serious corrective action is up two to three times the 2007 level.

Results include changes in local climate conditions, storm and wildfire frequency and intensity, the amount and timing of water available for human and habitat needs, and maximum and minimum temperatures. Not only are these effects troubling, but they also intensify other environmental stresses such as invasive species, toxic pollution, and the impacts of human growth and expansion with resulting habitat encroachment.

There was considerable discussion of the science used to track these impacts. The key is long term data sets. These also need to be broad in terms of geography and detailed in terms of specific dates, locations and information. Good sets come from weather records, ice cores, tree rings and rock cores – and the Audubon Christmas Bird Count, which provides the most complete record of numbers and distribution of living beings. Plotting these on GIS generated maps provides a display of historic population numbers and centers of occurrence and abundance. By comparing maps, we see

changes in bird populations. Also vital are Audubon citizen scientists’ records of arrival and departure dates.

Changes are many. The picture that emerges is one of serious impact upon the birds – such as seen in the “Birds in Decline” report released earlier this year. In California, of 21 species monitored, 63% show changes in arrival dates. The Partners In Flight list now includes 27 species of song birds and the Bird Species of Special Concern list has grown to 39 species and 24 subspecies.

Fortunately, the Assembly focused on solutions. These range from individual responses, such as calculating and reducing your household’s carbon footprint, to community actions and national legislative and consumer campaigns. More details can be found on the Audubon California and Audubon websites and in future editions of the Audubon magazine.

There was also discussion of habitat conservation forecasting tools, and strategies for bringing bird habitat interests into local land use planning decisions.

It was sobering. But there is encouragement too. Audubon protected birds from unrestrained plumage hunting in the early 1900s and unregulated pesticide use in the 1970s. The Brown Pelican and California Condor were brought back from the brink and seemingly hopeless habitats have been restored and enlarged. The Audubon cry was “We know how to do this.”

Our local chapter can work within its membership and the community to teach how to conserve energy in our daily activities; advocate for public transportation, recycling and community energy savings; encourage car pooling to our own events; work with children to pass on an appreciation for our natural world; and track and support legislative and policy measures. It is up to us as individuals and as a chapter to come together and make a strong, lasting response.

Help Coming For Owens Lake Birds

Before the Audubon California Assembly, Mike Prather and Pete Pumphrey contacted the state organization to try to encourage a discussion of bird populations and habitat at Owens Lake and the Lower Owens River, where avian life has returned in abundance. Mike has done a tremendous job, through endless work and devotion, of getting the word out about what is happening at the lake. The time has come to bring people together to work on a permanent plan for the birds which have returned.

The response that was received at the Assembly was very positive. State and national Audubon staff and board members and representatives from local chapters

expressed a real concern for the future of the lake and river, and a commitment to work with Eastern Sierra Audubon to develop and implement a program of public education and outreach and a long term plan for bird habitat.

Arrangements are now being made to have key Audubon staffers come to the Eastern Sierra to meet with ESAS members and identify needs, objectives and necessary participants; develop a project strategy; and assign responsibility for completion of tasks. Among the topics will be funding for this effort.

If you are interested in being involved, contact Mike or Pete. We’ll keep you informed as the process unfolds.

A Hard Year For Wildlife Brings a Record Number of Patients to Eastern Sierra Wildlife Care

Wind and drought have been hard on wildlife this year. Less water means less insects; with little or no rain, plant growth is sparse. Mice, gopher, ground squirrel and rabbit numbers were low, depriving predators of the prey needed to sustain themselves and their offspring. For Eastern Sierra Wildlife Care, 2007 has brought a dramatic increase in animals admitted. With over 2 months to go, admissions are at 435, as opposed to 367 for all of 2006. (May, June and July saw nearly 300 patients brought to ESWC; 125 were admitted in June alone!) Raptor numbers are up—76 so far; insectivore babies—phoebes, robins, kingbirds, swallows—were down as many of these species had only one brood. During the windy spring, numerous young raptors tumbled out of nests. Red-tailed and Cooper's Hawks, Great Horned Owls and American Kestrels—nearly twenty nestlings or almost-fledglings—got a lift back into their nest or nest tree, thanks to ESWC's dedicated Rescue and Return Team.



Young Cooper's Hawk

Kevin Calder

As early as August, emaciated raptors started arriving. Most, but not all of them, were juveniles. These young birds were dispersing from their nest territories, solely responsible for "supporting themselves." Prey was scarce and their hunting skills perhaps not as sharp as

needed. A young bird of prey may be barely sustaining himself; a slight injury can keep him from the hunt for a day or two or just slow him down a little. A few missed kills and he becomes still weaker and less successful and the downward spiral begins. Of 14 starving raptors admitted, only two—a juvenile Red-tail and a juvenile Swainson's survived. Sadly, for the others, the emaciation process had gone too far to be reversed.

In late July, American White Pelicans, no more than a few months old, began to show up—in trouble. Within a ten-day period, 6 of these young birds were rescued and brought to ESWC. One came from Tioga Pass, one was hanging out at Rock Creek Lake and another at June Lake; another was found outside of Bishop. All were very thin and loaded with ectoparasites. Four survived and were transferred to pelican specialists for further care. Most likely, drought conditions at their nest site forced them to migrate earlier than normal.

Recent winds in Mono County wreaked havoc with migrating grebes. In a 36-hour period, nine Eared Grebes were found grounded from Mammoth and Crowley to Bishop and Hammil. All but one survived. A Western Grebe was spotted on Wye Road under the KMart sign. These diving waterbirds land on pavement thinking it is water and then can't take off again: they can only take off by "running" along the surface of the water. After checking them for injuries, volunteers swim the birds, usually in the bathtub, to assess waterproofing. If it is good, they are taken right away to the nearest appropriate body of water and released. If oils and dirt from the roads compromise their waterproofing, the birds are washed until the feathers are once more clean and doing the job of keeping the grebes warm and dry. Then they, too, are released.

Along with the usual cast of characters—House Finches and Lesser Goldfinches, Mallards, crows, cottontails and raccoons—came a varied assortment of first-time or rarely-seen species. A Greater Roadrunner, struck 3 times by vehicles on Highway 395, survived; a year-old bobcat with a badly-broken leg did not. A nest of Black Phoebes were rescued from a drainage ditch, nest and all; these charming birds were raised and released. Two Great-tailed Grackles found at the golf course proved to be large, clumsy and charming babies, and what was first thought to be a tiny young Mallard soon grew into a Green-winged Teal. Others included a Lesser Snow Goose, Chipping Sparrows, several White-breasted Nuthatches, Mountain Bluebirds, a Northern Mockingbird and a Sage Thrasher, a Townsend's Solitaire, a juvenile Blue Grouse, a Black-throated Gray Warbler, and a juvenile Turkey Vulture. - **Cindy Kamler**

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Young Great Horned Owl at ESWC
Kevin Calder photo

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