



Meetings

Second 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 Eastern Sierra 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!

March 10

Enjoy the Shorebirds of Owens Lake!



American Avocet at Owens Lake. Photo by Mike Prather

ESAudubon.org or call Roberta at 872-7846. Everyone is welcome to attend. Non-members attending the meeting have a chance to win a free 12 month membership to the local chapter of Audubon!

So you miss the shore and the birding that it has? Well, continuing our tradition of beautiful bird and travel photos, join Mike Prather and Pete Pumphrey as they take us on a virtual tour of Owens Lake. We will “travel” all the way around the lake viewing the lush areas that create habitat for an incredible number of shore birds who frequent this Inyo County Important Bird Area. Dust mitigation by Department of Water and Power has allowed this to happen and with the work of ESAS and DWP and many others hopefully it will continue.

This will be a good program to either sharpen those identification skills or for those who have never driven around the entire lake. Also learn about the continuing process to preserve these bird areas with a update from Mike Prather and ESAS President Pete Pumphrey. For more info see www.ESAudubon.org

April 14

Threats to California Birds with Jordan Wellwood

The Central Valley/Sierra Nevada Conservation Coordinator for Audubon California, Jordan Wellwood, will discuss the major threats that birds face in California and what Audubon is doing to protect the landscapes that birds will need in order to thrive in the future. She will also share opportunities for local citizens to get involved and make a real difference in their communities. Jordan works with local chapters on a variety of conservation projects, as well as at the state level on Audubon’s priority projects for the Central Valley and Sierra Nevada.

President's Message

"The land is like poetry. It is inexplicably coherent" —Barry Lopez

Snow is falling outside this morning. Last week, the weather was pretending to be spring. This happens every year, and yet I am continually fooled. For 2010, I have resolved not to give in and remember that the cold is not behind us (according to Howard, it will be back in two or three days). These episodes of false spring draw their allure from my weariness of weeks of short, cold days. I grasp at any straw which promises warmer weather. (I know I will regret this in July and yearn to see my breath when I go out to get the paper...but that thought is for then, not for a snowy day).

Actually, the signs of spring are all around. The wings of the blackbirds have become bright red and their calls can be heard more and more frequently. The first shoots from our bulbs are bright green as they push their way out of the soil. Days are longer; trees and shrubs are in bud. It is not folly for me to begin to plan for summer trips to the Sierra backcountry.

In the fall, I want to put things in order and outline tasks to be done. I think this is a "back to school" reflex. It is odd to do this in September when the progression is in the direction of less time and more limiting conditions. It would seem more reasonable to do this listing and ordering in the spring, but now I am so eager to do something/anything, that I use any excuse to race outside

and do something in the dirt or walk somewhere without being wrapped up in layers.

We keep track of the first sightings of birds in our yard. I check out the records in anticipation of what is to come and run to the window to see what has captured the rapt attention of our cats. Soon the raucous cries of Yellow-headed Blackbirds will fill the air and there will be flashes of color in and out of the arbor vitae. I will laugh again at the silliness of young ravens that gather like middle school boys on our fences.

The comings and goings of birds provides a tether to the current of time. They are an orientation to where I am at and what is to come. Now, a reminder of the opportunities of growing season to come, later a sign that it is time to wind down and re-charge.

I am not one of those who can readily identify the birds that delight me. That is a skill which eludes me and which I envy in so many Audubon folks. Still, I take great pleasure in my avian companions; it pleases me that they visit my yard and nest in my trees and the eaves of my house. May each of us be visited often by our favorites and may we be able to realize and fully experience this miracle of life.

—*Pete Pumphrey*

Owens Lake Master Planning Continues

Learn More at the March Meeting

The Owens Lake planning effort continues. The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power has convened a facilitated process to develop a master plan for the future of Owens Lake. This is an outgrowth of the ESAS-initiated Conservation Action Plan process which began in April 2008. The master plan process will include the designation of habitat for permanent protection. Mike Prather and Pete Pumphrey will be representing our chapter as the process begins in March. Let us know if you want to be involved.

Mike and Pete have been named "conservation leaders" in the national Audubon annual report. This reflects the value of providing stable habitat at the lake and the importance of Owens Lake as a conservation site. Mike and Pete did not do this alone, they have had the privilege of working with a dedicated group of people from many agencies and organizations. Be sure to attend the March 10th chapter meeting, where they will bring everyone up to date on this history making process.

Little Brown Job Answers from Page 5: Spizella #1 - Brewer's Sparrow, Spizella #2 - Chipping Sparrow, Spizella #3 - Clay-colored Sparrow

Field Trips and Events

Check ESAudubon.org for up-to-date announcements of trips and events.

Saturday, March 6, Pleasant Valley Reservoir Birding

Are winter's mergansers, goldeneyes, and other visitors still around? Anybody singing yet? Join Larry Nahm and Carolyn Gann for a morning walk of about three miles. Bring binoculars, scopes, snacks and water. Meet at 8:00 a.m. at the "Y" (intersection of Hwy 395 and Wye Road) behind Bishop's Shell station, or at the parking lot at the northern end of the reservoir at 8:30. Contact the leaders at (760) 872-4125 for more information.

Saturday, April 24, ESAS Yard Sale

Save the date. Clean out that closet or garage. Eastern Sierra Audubon will hold its fundraising yard sale on Saturday, April 24 at the home of Phil Kiddoo at 2281 Longview in Bishop. Thank you, thank you, thank you, Phil and Brenda! Please contact Phil to find out how and when to bring your donations for sale. It would be really helpful if you would mark each item with a sale price **before** you drop them off. Check out the website and paper for the time for the sale itself. Last time out, this was quite a successful event so help us repeat that.

Saturday, April 10, Black Lake Birding Field Trip

Join Eastern Sierra Land Trust (ESLT) for an amazing day exploring Black Lake in the Adobe Valley of Eastern Mono County. Black Lake is a privately owned, ephemeral lake rimmed by moist alkali meadows and sagebrush. Water is scarce in the deserts of the Great Basin which makes this property an outpost for breeding species, including Willet and Wilson's Phalarope and it also serves as an important stopover site for migrant waterbirds, particularly in spring when water levels peak. The Audubon Society recognizes this site for its unique importance to birds of the Pacific Flyway by including it within the designated Adobe Valley Important Bird Area boundaries. Wildlife, mustangs, and native plant viewing opportunities abound! The landowners, who are currently working with ESLT to permanently preserve this important resource, have graciously agreed to allow us to visit their land for this unique birding opportunity. Bring binoculars and a lunch, and ESLT will provide snacks and drinks. To sign up and for more information, please contact Sarah Spano at sarah@eslt.org or call 760-873-4554.



Black Lake, Photo by ESLT staff

Saturday, May 22, Black Canyon and Marble Canyon, White Mountains

These east side canyons are the ideal place to be caught off guard by the cricket-like trill of Broad-tailed Hummingbirds or go nose to nose with a Black-chinned Hummingbird as she defends her nest location from any and all would-be threats. Many other birds should also be out and heard singing. Black Canyon begins at 4500 feet at its opening on the alluvial fan of the Owens Valley. At about 5500 feet Marble Canyon forks off to the east, and we'll hike up to the Montenegro Spring area at about 7000 feet. We will also hike a bit up Black Canyon to at least Lower Black Canyon Spring. At these elevations many botanical treats can be found, and with some determination and a little luck, we may find species such as broom milkvetch, desert crab apple, dwarf ninebark and Mono penstemon here. There will be about 5 miles of hiking, at least half of it uphill. Participants should bring lunch, snacks and plenty of fluids. 4WD vehicles with clearance are strongly recommended as the road up Black Canyon is always unpredictable. We will meet at 7:00 AM at the junction of Warm Springs Road and East Side Road. This is a joint trip with the Bristlecone Chapter of California Native Plant Society. For more information contact Jerry at jerryzat@gmail.com.

Discovering eBird & How It Makes Us Better Birders

Debby and Jim Parker

Jim and I are new to eBird (<http://ebird.org/plone/ca>). We have just discovered the eBird database in which birders can easily enter their bird sightings on the computer, organize them in a systematic way and make the information easily retrievable. We feel it's important to contribute to the body of knowledge about the status of birds in the Eastern Sierra and other areas of California that we visit, for example Salton Sea, Big Morongo, Susanville and Mt. Shasta. The creators of eBird will use the data to study and note any trends in bird population numbers and to better assess the current status and distribution of hundreds of bird species. Solid information on bird populations in California 100 years ago is relatively scarce, especially for remote hinterlands like Bishop and Lee Vining, but we know there have been major changes. In the next 100 years there are bound to be further changes. The more we know about bird populations, the more likely we will be able to act to prevent changes for the worse.

As we go through our past bird notes (in Debby's case, pocket-sized, bent-cornered spiral-bound notebooks stuck in a shoe box and cupboard for years, in Jim's case from his own database) and submit these observations into eBird, the eBird program "prompts" us about some of our bird entries. One minute you have no idea the bird you saw was rare or the number you had was high and the next moment you are "educated"! You hope you provided

documentation to the rare bird coordinators during your North American Birds county quarterly reports. This is usually the case in Inyo County where we have a fair idea of bird species' Status and Distribution thanks to Tom and Jo Heindel and their tireless hours of work outlining specifically which birds are present where and when.

But when you venture out into new birding territory, it's a whole new ball game. You are often "shooting in the dark." eBird catches possible mistakes and asks for more details, forcing you to go to your notes and ask yourself if you really did have that bird or not. Often, if it was a long time ago and you didn't take detailed notes, it's best to drop your sighting in order to not put erroneous information into eBird. If erroneous information is placed into this database it could skew the estimates of current populations that are so important for future generations to use in the "big picture" of the status and distribution of birds in California and the country.

The "behind-the-scenes" volunteer eBird Regional Reviewers examine submittals of rarities and counts of any species that are significantly higher than normal levels. They then contact us by email, to let us know that certain entries need substantiation. This becomes a learning moment in our eBird endeavors. Jim and I are just beginning to learn its fine nuances as time progresses. Recently we were surprised to learn that when we entered the Cassin's Kingbird we had at Big Morongo last week, thinking we had found a rarity, the eBird data base didn't even "burp"; we became educated that the Cassin's not the Western Kingbird is more common in that area in winter, contrary to what we originally thought, and both species are unheard of in Inyo County at this time of the year.

In conclusion, the California eBird web page, <http://ebird.org/plone/ca>, is a super innovative tool, free for the using, to organize our bird observations. It provides a checklist of the most probable species in every county in the country and gives feedback on each species' status there. The checklists vary with time of year. Interactive maps for locating your own birding locations are peppered with "Hot Spots" that other birders have chosen to tell the world about. Analysis tools allow anyone to explore a wealth of information about individual locations, or all of North America. We would like to thank Ron Overholtz who, whether he realizes or not, was part of the inspiration to get us motivated with this project.



Townsend's Warbler, Bishop, CA, May 5, 2009, found by Nancy Overholtz. Photo by Debby Parker

“Oh boy, an obscure sparrow!”

Tom & Jo Heindel

He was right. We were wrong!

Thirty years ago in an Ecuadorian forest, we were complaining about how difficult a group of greenish, seemingly unmarked flycatchers were to identify. At that same moment, down the trail came a new friend we had not yet met. He looked at what we were looking at and said, “Oh boy, an obscure flycatcher!” We both burst into spontaneous laughter at the epiphany that he had the right attitude. That was only the first of many lessons we learned from him that week.

As beginning birdwatchers, we’ve all encountered the dreaded LBJ, that is, the “little brown job,” that totally befuddles us. As beginners we prefer an adult Red-tailed Hawk, a male Red-winged or Yellow-headed Blackbird and may have even wished for a pair of binoculars that would flip up the bird’s name every time a bird was focused upon! There were groups that we avoided, like sandpipers or sparrows, because they were little brown birds that seemed to look all the same. But as days turned into years, we began to enjoy looking at a bird that we couldn’t name because the challenge invigorated us.

The three most important factors in identifying a LBJ are 1) seeing the bird really well, 2) knowing what parts of the bird need to be scrutinized, and 3) seeing the bird really well. OK, so there is one really important factor...seeing the bird really well. If you can’t tell if the lores are light or dark, you are not seeing the bird well enough to identify it. The second factor is equally important but if you can’t see the bird well, it won’t much help to know that you are supposed to be looking at the lores.

What’s a ‘lore’ you ask! Those who already know are well on their way to collecting LBJs on their lists. In the introductory section of all field guides is a drawing of the topography of a bird. Even a fisherman/hunter/skier knows some of the parts of a bird such as crown, cheek, chin, throat, breast, belly, sides, flanks, back, rump, etc. This leaves a shorter list that includes lores, median crown stripe, superciliary, postocular eyeline, auricular, malar, vent, scapulars, etc. With these new tools, LBJs will learn to fear your identification skills!

Three species in our area that are full-fledged LBJs are sparrows all belonging to the same genus, *Spizella*. The Brewer’s, Clay-colored, and Chipping Sparrows are small, slender sparrows with long tails and muted brown and cream patterns. But each one has a combination of a couple of marks that the other two don’t have. Brewer’s and Clay-colored have brown rumps and Chipping has gray. Brewer’s and Clay-colored have pale lores and Chipping has dark lores.

Obviously, Chipping can be quickly distinguished from the other two *Spizellas*, given a good view. If the rumps are brown and the lores are pale focus on the median crown stripe. Is it an obvious light, white to buffy, line down the center of the skull or is there no or a very short dull colored line in the forehead only? If it is obvious you are looking at a rare Clay-colored Sparrow and need to begin writing a description! If you aren’t sure it has a median crown strip, you are looking at the common Brewer’s Sparrow. The most confusing plumages of these three look-alikes are fall and winter dress, especially that worn by immatures. Given very good looks and knowing which parts of the bird to focus on, you, too, can make a confident and correct identification.

If you embrace the difficult LBJs and the challenge they offer, impossible tasks turn into the possible and the pursuit becomes more and more enjoyable. Let your mantra become, “Oh boy, an obscure ...!”



From top to bottom, *Spizella* #1, #2, and #3. See Page 2 for answers. Top photo by Kelli Levinson, Bottom Photos by Tom and Jo Heindel

Uncommon Rescue and Release of a Common Raven

by Cindy Kamler

Heading into Bishop from Chalfant on a warm August morning, Cathy Kelty, an Eastern Sierra Wildlife Care (ESWC) volunteer, glanced at the field on the east side of Highway 6 just north of Laws, where she often enjoyed spotting raptors. To her dismay and shock, what she saw instead was a Common Raven hanging upside down from a fence stake, its body swinging as the bird strove to free its trapped foot. Cathy stopped and approached the frightened bird. She could see that the back toe had caught in a gap between the wire holding the fencing to the stake and the stake itself. A closer inspection revealed that the toe was bleeding profusely and was nearly amputated.

After a few attempts to free the toe—the exhausted raven was cooperative—she realized that she would have to cut through the remaining shreds of tissue; the bone had already been severed. Using a pocketknife, she cut the skin still intact and soon had the bird in her arms. She had called her husband, Bob, to bring her a box to transport the bird in and he soon arrived. Next she placed a call to Eastern Sierra Wildlife Care's hospital at Keough's to let them know she would soon be there with the bird.

At the center, Director Cindy Kamler and an assistant readied a critical care cage and made preparations for treating an amputated toe. When Cathy arrived, she joined the team in the Med Room where the wounded toe was cleaned and a pressure bandage applied to stop the bleeding. The raven was given fluids, treated for shock, and started on antibiotics. Fortunately, the traumatic amputation had removed a little less than half the back toe, leaving enough to—hopefully—allow the bird to stand, walk and perch fairly normally. The raven was a young bird, born earlier that spring as shown by his pink mouth and tongue. (In both ravens and crows, the inside of the mouth turns black as the bird matures.)

During the next three weeks, the amputation site slowly healed. It was critical to ensure that the skin would be healthy enough to prevent the wound opening again during the raven's normal activities of hopping, flying, landing, bathing and perching. After about 8-10 days in a long fight, we felt that this had been accomplished and, happily, the bird was ready for release.

Policy for birds and mammals being rehabilitated is to return them to the location where they are found whenever possible. This means that they will be familiar with the location and know where to find food, water, and



The young raven recuperating, before being released back into the wild. Photo by Cindy Kamler.

roosting sites. They may also be able to reunite with parents, siblings or mates.

It was a beautiful, cool fall morning when Cathy and I and a few others from ESWC gathered at a spot on the northeast corner of that same field where the raven was found—a spot away from the highway where there were several cottonwoods in which the bird could land. Facing the carrier toward the trees, Cathy opened it and stepped back. Eagerly, the young raven hopped out and flew up into one of the cottonwoods and perched on a dead limb. He was soon pulling off pieces of bark and snapping up some insects that must have been hidden beneath. After about 15 minutes, he flew to one adjacent tree after another; for the first time, he started calling but there were no other ravens to be seen.

Suddenly, he took flight across the field on a diagonal, flying toward the southeast corner. We were pleased to see that his flight was strong as he began to climb higher and higher until his black form rose above the mountaintops, sharp against the deep blue sky. We were watching his course through binoculars. Suddenly, a second raven entered from the right! The two bird figures came together, then unexpectedly began to spiral around one another, wingtips nearly touching, dropping dramatically toward the ground below. We had no doubt that we had just witnessed our young raven reuniting with a parent or sibling for, even at that distance, an overwhelming feeling of joy reached us as we watched until the ecstatic birds disappeared from view. I have been fortunate to watch some other reunions during releases, but never one that featured such a powerful and dramatic display of joy.



Owens Lake Spring Big Day

Volunteers are needed for our 2010 Spring Big Day bird census May 1st at Owens Lake. The Owens Lake Important Bird Area is one of the Eastern Sierra's treasures. Last year's count had 62,000 birds! The census will primarily cover the Los Angeles Owens Lake dust control project which has attracted tens of thousands of migrating shorebirds and waterfowl. We need around 15 counters to make up 4-5 teams for sufficient coverage. All of us will get together in the afternoon for food, story telling and a tally. Please consider joining us and contact Mike Prather, mprather@lonepinetv.com



*American Avocet,
Photo by Mike Prather*

2009 Bird-A-Thon Results

Our thanks goes out to all of the supporters of the 2009 Eastern Sierra Audubon Bird-A-Thon. With your generosity the chapter raised \$1545! Our hard-working Bishop Christmas Bird Counters found 102 species of birds this year on the December count day. We were all nervous about switching our annual Bird-A-Thon date from the May International Migratory Bird Day to December and the Bishop Christmas Bird Count date. The total raised was beyond our dreams because of all of you. Your help will keep all of the chapter's programs running. Thank you again

—Mike Prather, *Bird-A-Thon Coordinator*

Chapter Officers

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