

AVOCET

SANTA CLARA VALLEY AUDUBON SOCIETY

Volume 72 • Number 1 • January 2024



Townsend's Warbler. Photo by Teresa Cheng

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Volume 72 • Number 1
January 2024

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Our Mission

The Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society (SCVAS) promotes the enjoyment, understanding, and protection of birds and other wildlife by engaging people of all ages in birding, education, and conservation



www.scvas.org

Cover Story

Matthew Dodder
Executive Director, SCVAS
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On Eponymous Names...

On November 1st, 2023 we learned that the American Ornithological Society (AOS) would embark on the unenviable task of renaming more than 80 of our North American birds, nearly 10% of the total. The project to move away from eponymous names is in response to a growing movement to separate species from references to

slavery and the persecution of native cultures that has had lasting and destructive impact on our nation. This decision is quite similar to that of many Audubon chapters to change their names to something without this dark legacy... “*Bird names for birds*” was the popular cry of those wanting to change the names of birds bearing the references of enslavers or those who fought for the practice, and the first bird name to fall was McCown’s Longspur. The original name honored John McCown, a Confederate officer who fought for a cause whose sole purpose was defending slavery. Now the bird would be called the Thick-billed Longspur, which not only separates the man from the bird and unburdens the species from

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connections to the darkest part of our history, it also tells us something about the bird's differentiating feature. The Winter 2020-2021 issue of the AVOCET features a wonderful article by Hugh McDevitt, an SCVAS volunteer, who wrote a detailed account of the decision. You can read his article here: www.scvas.org/s/2021_Avocet_Winter.pdf (pp. 11-13).

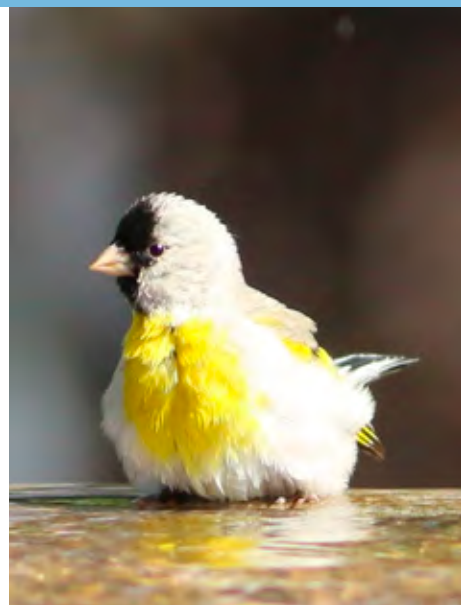
I am strongly in support of the project, because like any taxonomic update, it gives us an opportunity to learn more deeply about our birds and their lives. Take for example the one just given, despite having studied field guides for decades I never quite grasped that the bird's bill is so much larger than those of other Longspurs. Now I know. I also learned a little about an important historic figure, albeit a repugnant individual, and I've learned more about his place in history. To me, those two realizations are worth the inconvenience of having to learn a few new names or purchase a new field guide.

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Like many of you, I am thrilled as I browse field guides from around the world, the colorful and exciting names of these unfamiliar birds entice me to explore more deeply and perhaps even travel to see them... Think Volcano Junco or Zigzag Heron—names that on one hand tell us about the habitat, and the other hand recall a singular plumage characteristic. One might add Secretary Bird, Channel-billed Cuckoo, or Inaccessible Island Rail... simultaneously evocative and informative. Names have strength in other words! So let's indulge for a moment and consider a few suggestions for possible new names of our local birds. These are my preferred names, but I invite you to embark on the same thought experiment... As the actual new AOS-approved names become available, we will discuss their reasons in future articles. I'm looking forward to it! But until then, here are just a few playful suggestions I have for the committee...

Banana-billed Grebe (Clark's Grebe), **Tiny Swift** (Vaux's Swift), **Scrape-songed Hummingbird** (Anna's Hummingbird), **Violet-mustached Hummingbird** (Costa's Hummingbird), **Pacific-coast Hummingbird** (Allen's Hummingbird), **Anti-pelagic Phalarope** (Wilson's Phalarope), **White-wedged**

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Gull (Sabine's Gull), **Azure-throated Cormorant** (Brandt's Cormorant), **Tourmaline Woodpecker** (Lewis's Woodpecker), **Snowy-cheeked Kingbird** (Cassin's Kingbird), **Blue-black Jay** (Steller's Jay), **Shake-tailed Wren** (Bewick's Wren), **Awesome Goldfinch** (Lawrence's Goldfinch), **Flame-browed Oriole** (Bullock's Oriole), and on and on...

If the thought of learning new names seems like a difficult or bothersome task, remember that our brains are extremely pliable, and we are able to learn throughout our lives. The more we challenge ourselves to understand new ideas and acknowledge the power of words and names, the more we grow. We can at the same time learn from and build on the past while advancing toward the future. We can be better birders as we embrace a few worthwhile name changes.

I dream of a day when we may actually have a Tourmaline Woodpecker in Santa Clara County... But I don't have much hope. If the AOS doesn't like any of these ideas, maybe we can put in a plug for a few common-sense adjustments that might be easier for them to accept. How about changing Ring-necked Duck to Ring-**billed** Duck and make everybody's life a little easier?

Director's Desk

Matthew Dodder
Executive Director, SCVAS
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As I mentioned in the fall issue of the AVOCET, in an effort to be better stewards of the environment, we have decided to eliminate the printed version of the quarterly newsletter. This winter issue represents the first online-only AVOCET in what we hope will be a successful transition to electronic publication from now on. We expect the format to develop as we discover better ways of communicating in this way, but hope you will enjoy what this approach can offer. The current plan is to archive each issue on our website and notify members when it becomes available for download. Readers will have the option of printing out a personal copy if they wish. The monthly AVOCET Update email has been available in this way since July 2020, and has featured monthly announcements and events and has become an eagerly awaited arrival in members' inboxes. We hope you will enjoy this next phase of the AVOCET as well. Please let me know what you think, particularly about usability and legibility on your various devices (mobile phone, tablet, desktop).



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SCVAS has a new addition! I would like to welcome Leticia Gallardo, our newest board member. She comes to us from West Valley College where she serves as the Department of Biology Co-chair. She will bring new ideas and fresh insights to the Board. Her background in science and fundraising will be great additions to our Board and I look forward to working with her closely as she settles in to the job. You can read more about Leticia on our website scvas.org/who-we-are.

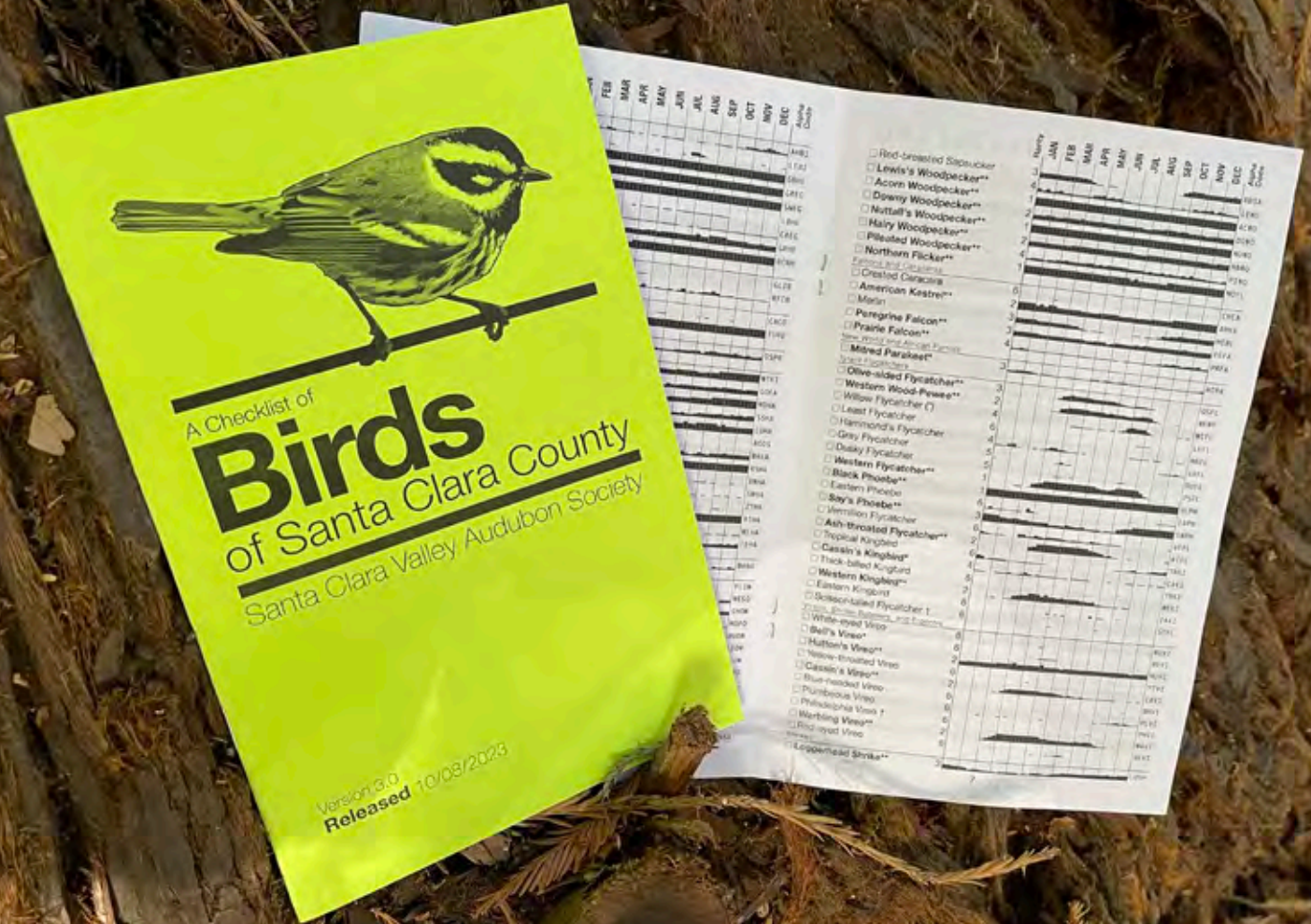
Finally, after careful consideration, the SCVAS Board of Directors and I have decided to formally begin the process of renaming our organization. This was decided in large part in response to the overwhelming majority of respondents to our recent poll of members who agreed it would be a positive change. This decision is however, just the first step in a long process we intend to complete before our Centennial in 2025. The Board and I will begin by forming a Naming Committee which will explore a variety of new names that better reflect our ongoing mission to promote the protection of birds through our education, conservation, and outreach programs. The Committee will present potential names to the Board and after deliberations, will present the name or names to the membership for a vote.

This is an important task and we thank you for your patience and involvement. Your support is, and always will be, the reason this chapter has been around for almost 100 years. **Thank you.**

A handwritten signature in white ink, appearing to read "Matta", is positioned to the right of the text. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

What To Look For

Matthew Dodder
Executive Director, SCVAS
director@scvas.org



Seasons in Santa Clara County are far from simple, but it might be possible to assign some general attributes to each of them if we allow a bit of poetic license. Spring, for example, might be distilled to song and dance, courtship, sex and defense, Summer on the other hand is persistent work of family life rewarded with a brief rest before another job, Fall might be the preparation before travel and the endurance

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required to get through lean times, and finally Winter, made entirely of hunger, struggle, survival and a curious desire to do it all again... These are just my words, poetic or not.

So while this past fall brought a modest storm of interesting migrants—some expected, others not—no one would have predicted the arrival of Dusky Warbler. Last year, after the famous Oriental Turtle-Dove sighting, I conducted an informal survey among birders as to what bird they thought was going to be the next addition to our county list. The answers came back strongly in favor of Waterbirds—Yellow-crowned Night Heron, Red-necked Stint, Neotropic Cormorant... but then the Painted Redstart, a mid-elevation woodland species from the southwest, actually showed up not entirely unexpected. It made sense when you look at other

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Northern California records, and I had suggested it was a possibility just a month earlier in my Warbler class. But wow! The point is, as hard as we try, it's very difficult to guess the correct *next thing*.

Which brings me to this winter season of birding. This will be an El Niño year again, which means warmer waters offshore, more rain, and milder temperatures in our area. More often, we hear about the effect of warming conditions on seabirds because during El Niño years they have difficulty finding food in our traditionally cold offshore waters. This has led to many nest failures during the spring and summer months because bait fish populations are prone to crash in warm waters so breeding seabirds cannot find enough to feed their young. It has also led to the arrival of southern birds, like Nazca Booby and Magnificent

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Frigatebird in our offshore waters as they too search for food. One never knows what rare southern birds might appear on a pelagic trip during such years.

But what does that mean for our inland land birds? I honestly don't know. But I can assure you, this winter will be different from the past few. Even last year's epic atmospheric river, which brought waves of record rains and flooding, and on its surface resembled an El Niño situation, was not the same. Atmospheric rivers occur with or without El Niño and they occur every year in varying degrees. So the question remains, what will this winter bring in terms of birding?

I've always thought that fall was the time of predicable surprises. The best time to go birding. Blackpoll, Blackburnian, Black-throated Blue... all exciting and rare,

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but each with a nearly annual occurrence in the Bay Area. Just watch for the reports. Winter on the other hand, at least for me, has held the greatest mystery. Will we see Evening Grosbeaks again? (yup, happened right after writing this...). Maybe Cassin's Finch. Is this the year for Harris's Sparrow? We could look to the north for rare winter arrivals as we often do, or to the middle of the continent for birds like Ferruginous Hawk, but I'm thinking perhaps we should look in other directions. West and south. If I had to guess, I'd say south.

I have a strong suspicion that some of the southern species mentioned earlier, **Yellow-crowned Night Heron**, **Neotropic Cormorant**, might be the next exciting additions to our checklist. Think about it. We don't have immediate access to the ocean but our county is filled with good

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wetland areas, and abundant ponds and reedy, marshy areas. Those birds have already been reported nearby and quite recently. In this predicted wet and warm winter, it might just happen. Of course, we could also look to our west in Asia for something yet unknown. Another Wagtail, perhaps?

This may all sound like pointless fantasy, but year after year, the rare species described in Steve Howell's 2014 work, *Rare Birds of North America* have made their unlikely appearances within spitting distance of the South Bay. Birds like Swallow-tailed Gull, Yellow-browed Warbler, Willow Warbler, Red-flanked Bluetail, Rustic Bunting. These are all from very far away... and why? The world and its climate are changing. Conditions change, but our understanding does as well. If there were ever a time to think about the birds found outside our immediate county, state or continent, it would be now. If we see a sudden change in the number of White-crowned Sparrows visiting our feeders, or a drop in Olive-sided Flycatchers we hear in summer, we should wonder why. Is it something we have done—a local change we can affect? Or is it due to something off our shores, outside our borders?

If there was ever a time to watch for the unusual, it would be now. Early arrivals, late departures, unexpected appearances

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of unfamiliar birds. These are the things I recommend we look for now. We will have unusual conditions this year, a climate that continues to warm, and more birders than ever before to document the effects of our human activities on the birds around us.

Absent mega rarities that compel us to update our checklist (again), we can still expect some truly great birds this winter. As always, White-throated Sparrow should be searched for in any flock of “crowned” Sparrows, particularly in shaded areas that Golden-crowned Sparrows favor. Swamp Sparrow will likely reappear in familiar mushy areas like Alviso Marina Park boardwalk, or the Bay Trail along the Palo Alto Airport runway. But I would for watch for this Sparrow in any areas that provide dense, wet cover, especially along the Bay. Ferruginous Hawk is regular in Coyote Valley but also can be found above Ed Levin Park or even bay front areas with rolling grassy hills like Byxbee Park. Recently we had reports of numerous Varied Thrushes flying south through the Santa Cruz mountains, perhaps the predicted rain this winter will mean an increase in their numbers on the valley floor.

Maybe even in our backyard again. I’m sure of one thing—whatever shows up, it will brighten our winter.

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One more thing... Motivated by a desire to keep eBird checklist information up to date to assist newer birders we have initiated a small project to add Santa Clara County historical records gathered over the years by Bill Bousman. With assistance from Barry Langdon-Lassagne, Eric Goodill, and Andy Melnick, the first set of missing records has now been added for sightings such as: Common Nighthawk, Prothonotary Warbler, Gray Catbird, and Northern Fulmar. Future work will include bringing in other historical records for birds subsequently recorded more recently (primarily since the advent of the use of eBird itself), such as: White-winged Scoter, Sandhill Crane, Brown Thrasher, and American Tree Sparrow. You may begin to see some of these older sightings appear in your search results soon. ~MCD



Track and Feather

Matthew Dodder
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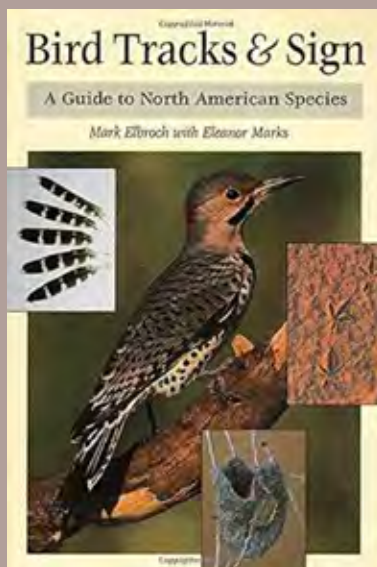
Footprints in the mud

This mystery image shows footprints in soft mud. The shot was taken by Carolyn Knight while at SFBBO's Coyote Creek Field Station (Restricted Access). This was in early April in the Floodplain beside Coyote Creek Trail. Carolyn added that the area is overrun with invasive grass for 11 months of the year, but is subject to severe flooding in some years, as it was last year during the historic rains. What bird or birds do you think produced these prints?

**Bird Tracks
& Sign**
A Guide to
North American
Species

Mark Elbroch
with Eleanor Marks

Stackpole
Books, 2001



Have a local bird mystery shot you'd like to share? Send it to director@scvas.org with a description. We might just feature it in a future installment of *Track and Feather*.

Tech Trends

**Matthew Dodder and
Malia DeFelice,**
eBird Reviewer for San Mateo County



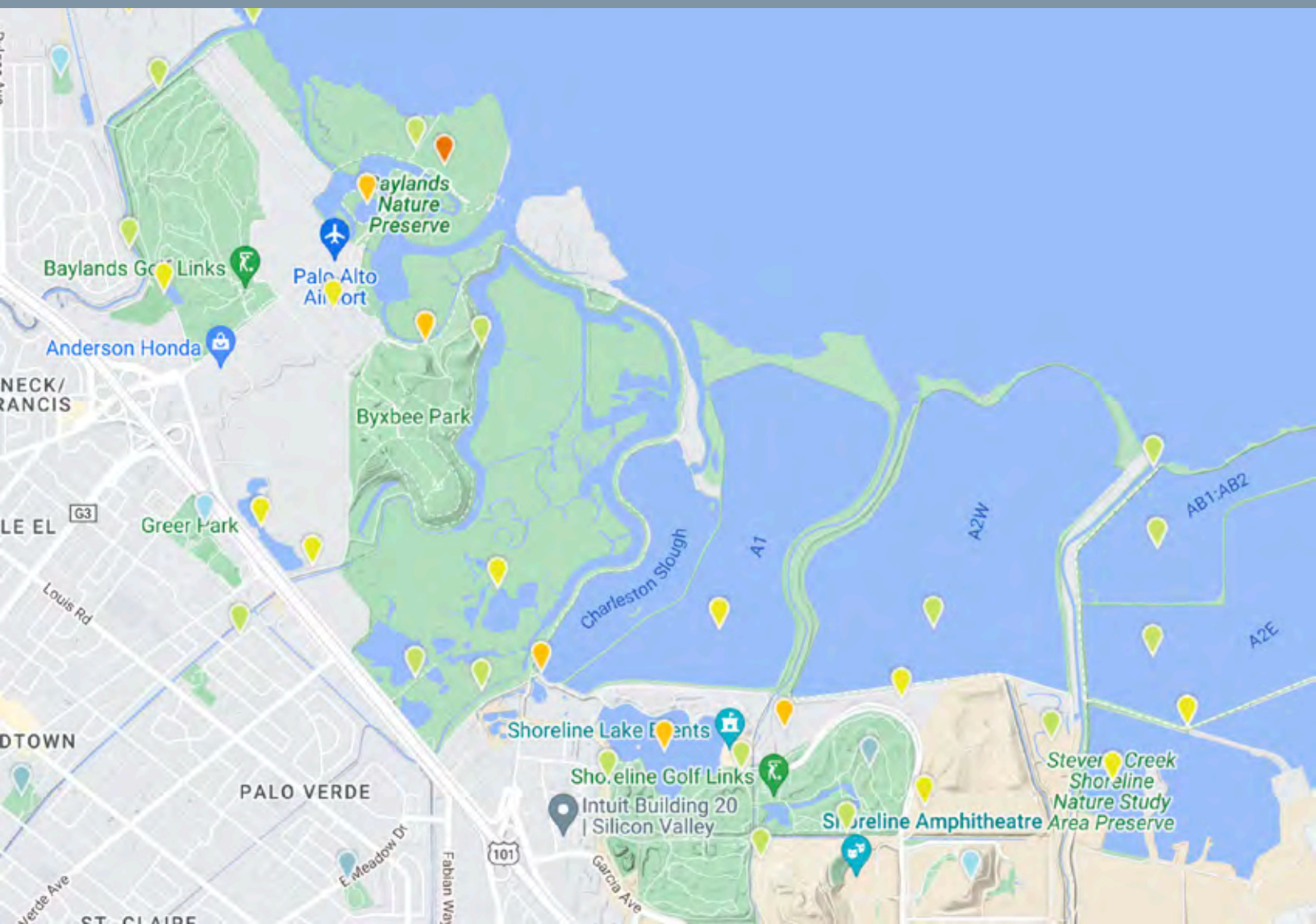
The following installment of Tech Trends comes from Malia DeFelice, eBird Reviewer for San Mateo County. Her “eBird Best Practices” was originally posted to the Pen-Bird on March 3, 2022. We have incorporated additional comments from Pete Dunten, our own county eBird reviewer, and Matthew Dodder who just likes to eBird a lot. While her comments were intended to prepare the San Mateo audience for spring migration, it is valuable advice for any eBird user anywhere throughout the year. Enjoy!

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Introduction: Everyone who has used eBird to report a “rare bird, unusually high counts of a species, or birds that are unusual for the time of year, or location”, is familiar with the automated prompt requesting more documentation. Here are just a few reminders about documenting your rare/unusual sightings on eBird:

Written Documentation: When you are prompted to provide documentation for a sighting of an unusual or rare bird, the #1 comment to add is a description of the bird. A description of the bird should contain field marks and defining physical or audible characteristics that helped you separate it from similar

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species. If your written description fits more than one species, you should add to it until only one species is left that fits everything you've written. This is the most important element you can add to your checklist record. The bird's behavior, what the bird was doing, where it was seen etc. can add depth to the record, but a description of what the bird looked/sounded like is the most important component. Remember, the rarer the bird, the more important thorough documentation becomes.

Early Arrivals: Accurate reporting of arrival timing is just as important to science as correct ID, and the two can go hand-in-hand. It is understood that not everyone will know if a bird is extremely early, sort of early, or just a little bit early. Some migrants return earlier than others. Some return a lot later than others. So please treat the prompt for more details for an early bird in a similar way that you would treat rare birds. Please provide confirmable media, or a description of what the bird looked like or sounded like and how it was separated from confusion species. When writing your details, consider how helpful your choice of words will be to other eBirders, researchers, scientists and people doing important conservation work now, and far into the future.

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Photos and Audio: eBird has made uploading photos and audio recordings relatively easy. Media are a great way to document your sightings. And we are fortunate in San Mateo County to have many good photographers. However, there are times that we see photos or hear audio, that are of a less than optimal quality and they alone do not support the ID of the bird. If your uploaded media is less than optimal, please supplement your record by adding descriptions of the bird(s) as noted above.

General photo guidelines summary: Upload photos for both rare and common species. Crop and edit your images before uploading, but try not to over-crop or over-edit. Upload your full-resolution images, as long as they are JPG and under 20 MB each. Refrain from adding a watermark or other text to your images. Add comments and metadata and rate your photo after you upload it. Please don't upload composite images or back-of-camera photos. Upload multiple photos (up to 20 per species), but only if they are sufficiently different. Photos must be your own and adhere to eBird's media license agreement.

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Bell's Vireo (Eastern) © Matthew Dodder

Back-of-Camera Guidelines:

Recently, I was also asked a very specific question about Back-of-Camera “BOC” photos submitted on eBird checklists. So here are some links from the eBird Help Pages regarding eBird’s stance on Back-of Camera photos. When you’ve photographed a rare bird, it can be tempting to take a shot of your camera’s LCD screen and upload it to your eBird list for quick documentation purposes. This is called a Back-of-Camera photo (BOC). While this can be a reasonable method of getting the word out in a hurry, please remember to go back and replace the placeholder images. Back-of-camera images may not be high enough resolution to show critical details, lack important metadata such as date and time, and are not useful for projects like MerlinVision. Everyone appreciates when word of a rarity gets out quickly with confirmable evidence, but please replace BOC photos on eBird checklists with the real deal, as soon as it is convenient.

Details to be added or Photos/Audio to be added: When compiling checklists in the field using a smart device, it can be difficult to type detailed notes. For birds flagged for more details, please use comments like “Details to be added” or “Photos/Audio to be added”. But use that wording only as a temporary placeholder in your checklist comments. Avoid making those “to be added” comments permanent. Try to write your descriptions of the birds and field marks/notes etc. as soon as you can while the details are still fresh in your mind. Don’t wait until a time too far in the future when details are fuzzy at best. Upload your supporting photos and audio as soon as it is convenient , especially if it is an early arrival or a rarity you are documenting.

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Hotspots: If you are birding at a known eBird Hotspot please select the known eBird Hotspot as your checklist location. Unfortunately, it is very easy to select an auto-assigned location when entering your checklist data with a smart device in the field. The eBird Hotspot may not be the first location option in the list of location choices, so please take care to look for the official hotspot.

Merlin Users: If you are using Merlin to identify a bird that gets flagged for more details, please upload your audio recording to your checklist as soon as it is convenient. Leaving a comment “ID”d by Merlin” is not considered sufficient documentation. Merlin can be accurate, but Merlin can also be very wrong and still needs the human element to review suggested Identifications. It is always best to try to see a vocalizing bird in order to get visual confirmation of the ID when possible.

Species High Counts for eBird records: The mobile app now prompts species “High Counts” with a request for added details. A brief comment describing how the number was determined, i.e. “counted by 10’s” or “direct count” is what eBird is looking for. A numeric estimate of birds is always better than an “X”. In addition, in some cases it may be necessary to confirm how the species was ID’d by providing a brief description of the species and how it was separated from similar species.

A Big Thank You to All for your media contributions, documentation and note-taking efforts to support rare bird sightings, unusually high counts of a species, or birds that are unusual for the time of year or location in our county.

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Final thought by Pete Dunten: Birders from San Mateo and Santa Clara make eBird fantastic! But follow the advice from Malia, and the review process would be so much easier!

The eBird website is filled with resources and helpful articles covering various topics. A few of them are linked below:

Getting Started with eBird:

<https://support.ebird.org/en/support/solutions/articles/48001158707-get-started-with-ebird>

FREE eBird essentials course

<https://support.ebird.org/en/support/solutions/articles/48001158707-get-started-with-ebird#Take-the-eBird-Essentials-Course>

How to document your sightings:

<https://support.ebird.org/en/support/solutions/articles/48000803130-how-to-document-your-sightings>

Counting large numbers of birds:

<https://ebird.org/news/counting-101>
<https://ebird.org/news/counting-201>
<https://ebird.org/news/counting-102>

Uploading media:

<https://ebird.freshdesk.com/en/support/solutions/articles/48000825713-adding-photos-and-sounds-to-your-ebird-checklists#anchorPhotoGuidelines>

The Decision to...

Susan Pelmulder
Vice President of the
Board of Directors

Make a Legacy Donation

This year, when I updated my trust, I added a bequest to SCVAS. When I pass, my gift will be added to the Legacy Fund, which is reserved for projects that promote the long-term sustainability of our organization and its mission. We are coming up on our centennial celebration and looking towards our bi-centennial. This act makes me part of a legacy of education and conservation for birds and bird habitat.

In making the decision to add a bequest to SCVAS, it wasn't that I don't have worthy family members to pass my wealth to, but that they will all survive without receiving every penny I have; they can share. They also know my passion for birds and the environment, so they won't be surprised.

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Leaving SCVAS a percentage of my estate made the most sense for me because I didn't have to guess how big my estate would be decades from now. If I end up needing to use most of my estate, the other beneficiaries will still receive something. Your situation may be different, and you may wish to leave a specific amount of money, real property or stock account. Alternatively, you might name SCVAS as a beneficiary of a traditional IRA, which passes outside of any trust or will.

Many of you are aware that there was a survey of the membership regarding changing our name, which the SCVAS board is exploring. You can make a bequest now and have it still be effective if the name changes by naming "Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society, by whatever name it is known, 22221 McClellan Rd., Cupertino, CA 95014."

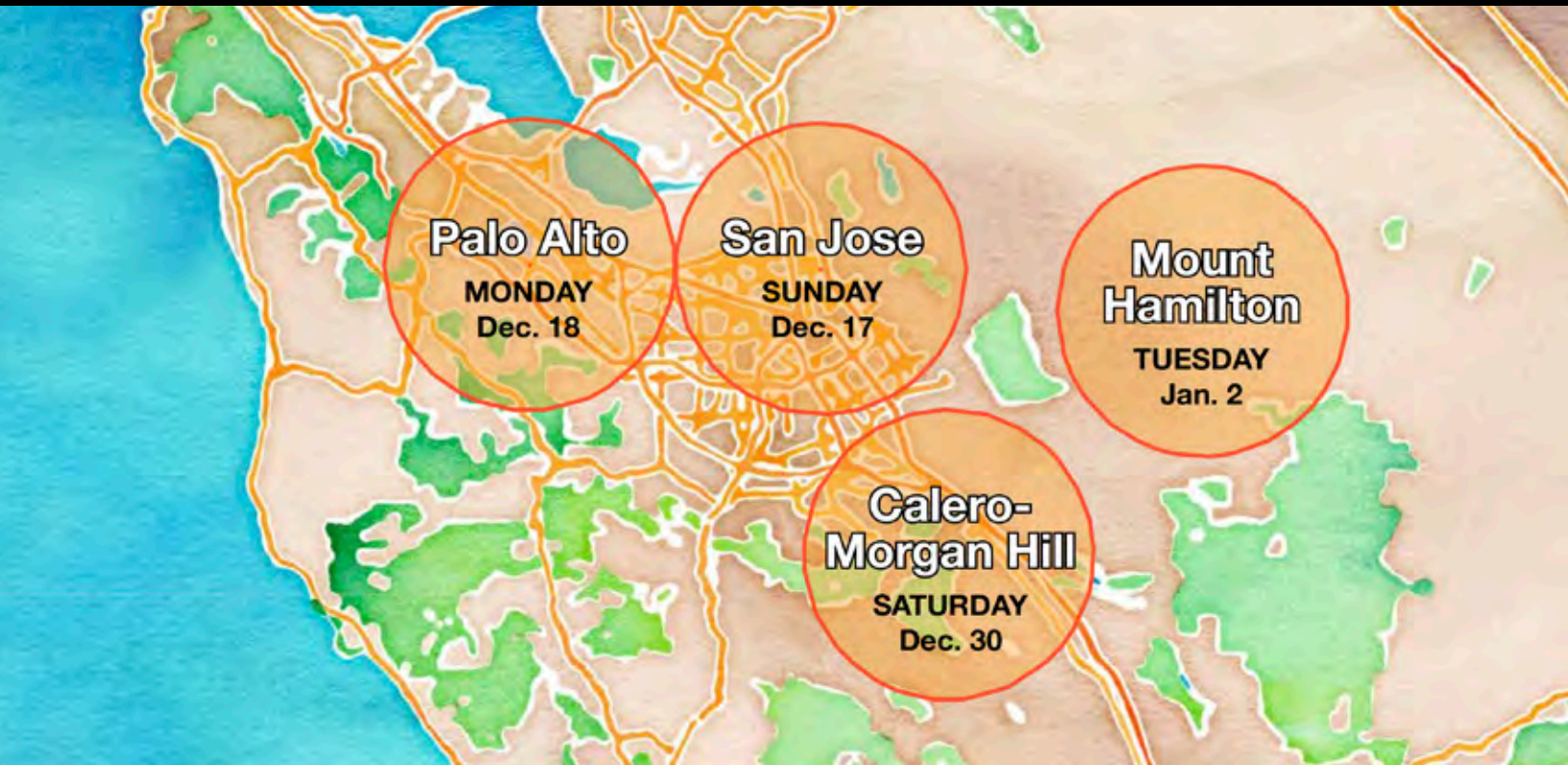
A gift for the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society in your will, trust or other estate plan creates a legacy of education and conservation for birds and their habitat. Pass on your passion for birds and their environment to generations to come.

To confidentially discuss a Legacy Fund gift, call Matthew Dodder at 408-252-3748. Please see our webpage for more information at <https://scvas.org/donate>. We also encourage you to discuss your gift with your tax, financial or legal advisors.

If you have already left SCVAS a bequest, please let us know so that we can recognize you as a member of our Legacy Society if you wish.

Christmas Bird Count

Ann Hepenstal
SCVAS Volunteer



'Tis the Season

Every December-January, SCVAS sponsors several Christmas Bird Counts (CBCs), part of a citizen science project coordinated by the National Audubon Society. Organizations use data collected in this long-running wildlife census to assess the health of bird populations and to help guide conservation action. Our “Count Circles” are predefined, 15-mile-diameter circular areas which are then divided up into sectors and distributed among multiple birding teams to go out and find all the birds they can, documenting the species and number of birds seen.

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Our Count Circles and their organizers:

San Jose Count

December 17 (Sunday)
Contact [Mike Azevedo](#),
San Jose Compiler

Palo Alto Count

December 18 (Monday)
Contact [Ann Hepenstal](#), coordinator
(Al Eisner continues
as Palo Alto Compiler)

Calero/Morgan Hill Circle

December 30 (Saturday)
Contact [Rick Herder](#),
Calero Compiler

Mount Hamilton Circle

January 2, 2024 (Tuesday)
Contact [Bob Hirt](#),
Mount Hamilton Compiler

The CBC is a long-term dataset used to analyze trends and understand the impact of habitat changes. The development of eBird and community science programs (e.g. Great Backyard Bird Count, BioBlitzes, iNaturalist) has greatly expanded the dataset, but CBC gives us recurring point-in-time data. With the CBC, we learn about the birds that winter in our area, gaining insight into population changes:

- Impact of climate change, summer location habitat changes, summer food availability;
- Status of bird species in decline (e.g. Burrowing Owls, Loggerhead Shrike);
- Appearance of vagrants (e.g. Painted Redstart, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Curlew Sandpiper);
- Status of invasive and escapee species (such as Eurasian Collared Doves, Scaly-breasted Munias, Mitred Parakeet);

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- Birds expanding their range (think: California Condor, now being seen in and near Santa Clara County); and
- Impact of habitat changes on bird populations: recovery from SCU fires, impact of the 2022-23 severe winter storms which downed trees and impacted habitat

Join in!

Each Count Circle needs people to join their count, and everyone can play a role, from beginner to expert birder. Check your calendar, look at the Count Circle map, and contact the organizer of the Count--or CountS!--that interest you. Some territories require extensive walking, sometimes in difficult conditions like mud, terrain, elevation. Other territories are suburban, offering easy access to restrooms and coffee breaks. The CBC count circles cover a lot of geography with varying habitat and species, with birding territories to entice every birder to join in. The Count Circles welcome back returning teams of birders each year—but have turnover as people move, retire, have conflicts, etc. While we welcome beginning birders to help spot birds, keep records, etc., this year we especially need skilled birders and experienced leaders in some territories to cover this turnover. (Hint: if you can fill out an eBird checklist, you can gather data on the CBC). Email the Count Circle organizer listed above to volunteer your help.

Learn more

Read about [how the data is used](#) and about the [histories](#) of our counts. Also see our [Highlights and tables for past Christmas Bird Counts](#). For information outside our area, visit [Audubon Christmas Bird Count](#).

Reaching out

Carolyn Knight
Education and Outreach
Manager

And welcoming in

Outreach is one of the most varied aspects of our mission statement. We rely on outreach to build support for our advocacy efforts in Santa Clara County, our education programs are as much about building connections for students between themselves and nature as they are about teaching a curriculum, and we love getting to welcome newcomers to birding through our field trips. Anything, from attending environmental festivals to answering questions about bird feeders, can fall within the definition of outreach.

We're very excited to be able to share a few of our ongoing outreach projects with all of you. These efforts are working to

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Students learn about adaptations through designing their own birds at an Earth Day Festival



Birding team: Unice Chang, Diane McCoy, and Joyce Zhang

build a welcoming community around birding and the nature we all love, so that SCVAS can truly reflect the wonderful diversity of humanity that can be found in Santa Clara County. Birds are a fantastic gateway to a greater appreciation of our local ecosystems, and we're lucky enough to have a wide variety of avifauna to connect people with here in our county.

Mandarin Language Field Trips:

SCVAS has been lucky to welcome Joyce Zhang into our ranks of field trip leaders in the past year, and we're very excited to be able to offer Mandarin language field trips because of her bilingual talents! These monthly field trips are led in Mandarin and English and have become a popular event for our Mandarin-speaking community members to bird and socialize together. With Joyce's help we've also been able to expand our collection of non-English self-guided field trips, so that we can now offer one of our chapter's most sizable assets

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Bioblitz with Keep Coyote Creek Beautiful at Kelley Park in San Jose



POST Wild & Scenic film festival at Foothill Community College

to a far wider audience. Santa Clara County is home to people from across the world, and offering field trips in languages other than English is one way we can welcome our community to birding.

Festivals:

Whether the festivals we attend are celebrations of anniversaries, seasons, or some really excellent animals, SCVAS is always excited for the opportunity to talk birds with the public. Each year SCVAS will attend a dozen or more festivals in the South Bay Area, each one celebrating some aspect of our county's beloved ecosystems. Festivals are a wonderful way to meet people in their communities, and each event brings SCVAS and our mission to new groups.

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At festivals we have the opportunity to interact with people of all ages, backgrounds, and birding levels, and they can be wonderful avenues for our organization to reach people who might only have a passing knowledge of local birds. Staff and volunteers get to act as the ambassadors of SCVAS, answering questions on everything from advice on optics, bird feeders, conservation, and if the taxidermy owl we brought with us is “real”.

Queers of a Feather:

SCVAS is proud to partner with [Peninsula Open Space Trust \(POST\)](#) in offering our quarterly LGBT+ field trips on POST-owned property. These events are led by and for members of the LGBT+ community, and our goal for these trips is as much about creating a safe space as it is about the birds! Queers of a Feather field trips are open to birders of all levels, from the bird-curious to the seasoned twitcher, and because of our partnership with the folks of POST, we do range outside of Santa Clara County for these events.

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SCVAS members and volunteers at Watershed Day, improving habitat at McClellan Ranch with Grassroots Ecology

Women Walk the Wilds:

We're very pleased to now offer a safe space for birders who identify as women, femme, or nonbinary with our Women Walk the Wilds field trip series. These trips go beyond the birding, with the goal of fostering a sense of community amongst participants, creating a welcoming atmosphere to people new to birding and new to SCVAS, all while offering a safe way to explore new birding locations. Everyone deserves to feel comfortable outdoors, and we're excited to be able to offer this opportunity to explore with the public.

Drop in Birding:

Birds are one of the most accessible types of wildlife we can encounter in our day to day lives, and the idea behind Drop in Birding is to take advantage of that fact! The team of field trip leaders

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SCVAS volunteers building nest boxes with children at the Gilroy Public Library





Queers of a Feather

behind our Drop in Birding events take advantage of busy birding hotspots to introduce passersby to the fantastic world of birds that surrounds us. Armed with binoculars, scopes, and good cheer, the wonderful humans involved in this project would like to invite you to join them for a minute or an hour in appreciating the wildlife around us! These events are fully accessible, and participants are welcome to drop by any time within the event window.

Our outreach committee works tirelessly to ensure that SCVAS is making efforts to connect with our larger community, and I would like to thank Ann Hepenstal, Julie Amato, Laura Coatney, Dani Christensen, Joyce Zheng, Jim Dehnert for all their efforts. If you have ideas for how SCVAS can expand our outreach efforts, or if you would like to get involved with any of the projects above, please contact Carolyn Knight at programs@scvas.org.

Conservation Corner

Shani Kleinhaus
Environmental Advocate



Young Burrowing Owl at artificial burrow

The Burrowing Owls of Santa Clara County

Do you remember the burrowing owls of Mission College? Burrowing Owls were once common in undeveloped land within our communities, especially on the valley floor and along the Bay. Mission College, for example, hosted two dozen breeding pairs of burrowing owls that raised their young on campus. But the owls of mission college are long gone, their habitat replaced by buildings and parking lots. Similar is the fate of almost all our local Burrowing Owl colonies: in the past twenty years, development and other human activities have devoured or rendered unusable the habitat that these

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beautiful, charismatic birds call home. As their available habitat shrunk, owls were displaced from most of the areas they used to inhabit. In remaining areas, the pressure by predators (birds, mammals and even reptiles) increased. As a result, this species has been all but extirpated from our landscapes.

Please watch our short 2013 film:

[Reversing the Trend: Saving Burrowing Owls](#)

If you have had the opportunity to see a Burrowing Owl - standing sentinel at her selected burrow, watching out for predators and looking for prey- then you know just how endearing these owls are, and why we have not given up on them. Can we bring the Burrowing Owls back?

Our Burrowing Owls

The Western Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*) is a small, long-legged owl that (in our area) uses ground squirrel burrows for shelter and to raise their young. Burrowing Owls inhabit grasslands, rangelands, agricultural areas, deserts, and other open spaces characterized by low or sparse vegetation. Unlike most owls, Burrowing Owls are often active during the day, although they do most of their hunting during dusk and dawn. Living in burrows close to the ground means that to thrive, owls need areas of barren ground or short vegetation, so they can watch for predators and find food items (insects, lizards, small rodents). Burrowing Owls also require a substantial California Ground Squirrel population to provide burrows and to act as sentinels. Ground squirrels call

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out warnings, drawing attention to approaching predators and thus benefiting Burrowing Owls, as both species share many of the same predators. In addition, many Burrowing Owl prey items reside in squirrel burrows.

Santa Clara County provides wintering grounds for migratory Burrowing Owls that breed in Canada and northern states, and for resident Burrowing Owls that can be found here year-round. The number of Burrowing Owls that spend the winter here fluctuates (perhaps with the severity of winters in their breeding areas). The resident breeding population has been declining and at this time, is sustained only by deliberate conservation actions, which we will describe below.

The breeding population of Burrowing Owls in Santa Clara County has declined over time and is now on the verge of local extirpation (the total loss of the local owl population.) In the 1980's there were hundreds of Burrowing Owls with robust breeding populations in Morgan Hill, San Jose, Milpitas, Santa Clara, Sunnyvale, Mountain View and Palo Alto. By 2014 the numbers had dropped to 116 Burrowing Owls at 8-10 local locations. In 2022, only 33 breeding Burrowing Owls were observed at 4 South Bay locations. Overall, the breeding population has shrunk by more than 90%. No wonder so many stories described the Burrowing Owl population as standing "on the brink" of extirpation.

The Burrowing Owl has been designated as a "California Bird Species of Special Concern" since 1979. This designation is expected to provide protections to this species, and since then, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife provided several iterations of recommendations and guidelines for

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mitigating and minimizing harm to the owls. However, this designation and the provided guidelines failed to protect our Burrowing Owls and their habitat in Santa Clara Valley, despite our ongoing advocacy efforts to save the species.

Early on, we focused on advocacy for strong mitigation measures. We hoped that the state of California would require mitigation measures that would save individual owls, compensate adequately for the loss of habitat, and provide refuge to the birds. We were disappointed as state regulatory agencies shied away from taking measures that could be seen as stifling economic growth and development. Inadequate mitigation measures for the loss of habitat and for the eviction of local Burrowing Owls were adopted despite our efforts, allowing development to take over critical Burrowing Owl habitat in Morgan Hill, Coyote Valley, Sunnyvale, San Jose and Santa Clara. This development resulted in the loss of Burrowing Owls and the elimination of their colonies

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Burrowing Owl family at nest

and habitat. With the blessing of the state, local mitigation measures focused on paying fees to provide potential habitat elsewhere—primarily in Alameda County—at the expense of our local population.

Over time, the remnant populations that were still holding on in airports, landfills, and golf courses also lost ground. Airport safety measures and expansion all but eliminated the populations in our region’s airports (San Jose International, Reid-Hillsview, Palo Alto, and Moffett Field). Landfill regulations required the poisoning of ground squirrels on landfills in Palo Alto and Sunnyvale. Golf courses are also not hospitable to ground squirrels, and thus burrowing owls. Lastly, small open spaces that were available to squirrels and to the owls are being developed under “infill” state laws, which have removed the requirements for transparency and mitigation that were previously provided by the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

As we witnessed the short hand of the state regulatory agencies, and the decline of Burrowing Owl population and their habitat, we needed to be resilient and adjust our advocacy efforts. We needed to think on a larger scale and engage agencies with more resources and more power. And we needed to protect the owls in existing protected habitats (especially at Shoreline in Mountain View, and at the bufferlands of the Waste Water Plant in San Jose). We also needed to promote the re-establishment of owl colonies in Coyote Valley, as our northern colonies were increasingly subject to habitat fragmentation, diminishing resources, and increasing human activities and predator pressures.

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Our first success was to ensure that the Burrowing Owls were included as a ‘Covered Species’ in the Valley Habitat Plan. As stakeholders in the ten years of planning, we supported the development of the Valley Habitat Plan, and the inclusion of provisions for Burrowing Owls conservation in this plan. The Valley Habitat Plan was ultimately adopted in 2013. The Habitat Agency that manages the implementation of the Valley Habitat Plan collects funds from development projects and uses these funds to implement conservation actions that protect and support the recovery of the 18 endangered animal and plant species, including the Burrowing Owl. The Habitat Agency has been investing in [critical conservation programs](#), including habitat enhancement with native plants and the removal of invasive plant species, a supplemental feeding program, an overwintering program for juvenile owls, and a captive breeding program.

In addition to our work on the Habitat Plan conservation strategy for the Burrowing Owls, we advocated with the cities of Mountain View, San Jose, Sunnyvale and Palo Alto for the development of Burrowing Owls protection plans.

- **The City of Mountain View**, under the leadership of Ronit Bruyant and Margaret Abe-Koga, developed an outstanding [Burrowing Owl preservation Plan](#) in 2012 and hired a biologist to implement it. This plan has been successful for over a decade. It is coordinated with the Habitat Agency and is successfully implementing conservation programs for nesting Burrowing Owls.

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- **The City of San Jose** started working with SCVAS to monitor and enhance Burrowing Owl habitat at the Water Pollution Control Plant in 2011. Since then, a 200-acre Burrowing Owl Preserve has been established at the Regional Wastewater Facility in Alviso. This preserve is managed by SCVAS and Talon Ecological Research Group, and currently supports the largest nesting Burrowing Owl population in the region.
- **The City of Palo Alto** lost its Burrowing Owl nesting population of owls long ago. In an effort to attract nesting owls, the City identified habitat enhancement and protection areas in the [2019 Byxbee Park Master Plan](#). However, due to implementation of State landfill restrictions, ongoing elimination of ground squirrels, disruptive recreational activities and the scarcity of Burrowing Owls in the region, owls have not returned to nest in Palo Alto. Wintering owls are occasionally observed at Byxbee Park, to the delight of visitors who encounter them.
- **The City of Sunnyvale** developed plans to allow Burrowing Owls on parts of the landfill and Baylands park in 2015. The plans seem to have been abandoned, potentially due to State regulation. At this time, Sunnyvale keeps the landfill inhospitable to ground squirrels, and therefore—to Burrowing Owls.

We continue to advocate for Burrowing Owls in the above-mentioned cities, and we are also supportive of the Habitat Agency's investments in efforts to re-establish Burrowing Owl colonies south of San Jose. Specifically, in 2023 the Habitat Agency partnered with the Peninsula Open Space Trust and

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the Open Space Authority, focusing on Coyote Valley. These programs are critically important if we are to bring the owls back to open space landscapes that are not as fragmented as the protected lands closer to the Bay. Here they are less exposed to human access and disturbance than in north-county parks.

The sustained effort to save the Burrowing Owls of Santa Clara County has been a difficult journey, with many setbacks and many successes. Yet we have not given up hope, have not stopped advocating, and we look forward to a time when we can turn the corner and welcome a sustainable population of Burrowing Owls back to our landscape.

To help protect the Burrowing Owls of our county please consider donating to the SCVAS, and please let advocate@scvas.org know if you can help advocate for the owls!

Field Notes (August – October 2023)

Pete Dunten
eBird Reviewer



Curlew Sandpiper by Liz Frith

Doves through Condors

A **White-winged Dove** was a surprise visitor to a Morgan Hill neighborhood on 22 – 23 Sept (SCR, MJM). The Dove was the 10th county record. White-winged Dove is usually found as a fall vagrant; 8 of 10 have been in late summer or fall. Fall migration brought a number of less commonly found shorebirds. A **Golden-Plover** resting with larger shorebirds and ducks on 10 Sept at the Palo Alto Flood Control Basin could not be identified to species (P Du, GL, LF, SW). A **Pacific Golden-Plover** stopped on pond A9 in Alviso on 24 Sept (MMR, RJ, MJM) and was not seen again. A9 hosts thousands to tens of thousands of shorebirds at high tide, so re-finding

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any one individual can be a challenge. Between 5 Sept and 9 Sept, a **Curlew Sandpiper** foraged on Charleston Slough and rested at Coast Casey Forebay amongst Dowitchers (HZ, PDU, LZf). Could this have been the same individual seen in the winters of 2021-2022 and 2022-2023? The location was close to where a Curlew Sandpiper spent the previous two winters, namely Palo Alto Baylands and Harriet Mundy marsh. The levees around the Alviso ponds attracted **Ruddy Turnstones**, with two adults visiting 30 – 31 July (MMR, RJ, MJM, m. ob.) followed by an immature Turnstone from 15 – 18 Aug (PDU, m. ob.) and again on 20 Aug (MDO) and 26 Aug (LZf). Two **Black Turnstones** put in a brief appearance at Charleston Slough on 3 Sept (ChS, JiS). A **Ruff** was at one of the Lockheed ponds from 24 Sept (MMR, RJ, MJM) through 5 Oct. A total of six **Semipalmated Sandpipers** were noted between 11 Aug and 27 Aug, all hatch-year birds. The first were found on 11 Aug, single birds at Alviso pond A11 (GL) and on Charleston Slough (StS). On 12 – 13 Aug one stopped at State St and Spreckles Ave (MMR, MDO); another was at Palo Alto Baylands on 19-20 Aug (CG, MJM). The fifth and longest-staying was along the Don Edwards NWR entrance road from 20 – 23 Aug (ASi), and another individual was there between 25 – 27 Aug (ACh). A **Parasitic Jaeger** tried to relieve Bonaparte's Gulls and Forster's Terns of their catch at Alviso pond A9 on 29 Oct (MMR, MJM, RJ). The sightings rate of Parasitic Jaeger is fairly low, about four per decade. A **Sabine's Gull** at the Sunnyvale WPCP from 15 – 21 Sept was at an expected location (fide eBird). Another seen at the Los Capitancillos ponds on 17 Sept was our first inland record (photographed by HF, identified by CG). A **Franklin's Gull**

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was a nice find on 24 Sept at Charleston Slough (MMR, RJ). A **Black Tern** continued at Shoreline Lake through 6 Aug after spending the summer (m. ob.). Another was at the Sunnyvale WPCP from 8 – 12 Aug (MB, GL, m. ob.). Single Terns were also seen at Charleston Slough on 12 Aug (BB) and Sunnyvale WPCP on 25 Aug (RJ, MJM, MMR). A first-summer Tern stopped at Sunnyvale WPCP on 17 Sept (LY, RLU, m. ob.). The fall passage of **Common Terns** was marked by a single Tern at pond A2E on 17 – 18 Sept (MDo). The high count for **Least Terns** was only two at ponds A2E and A2W, the lowest in 30 years of record-keeping. One to two Terns were present on A2E and A2W, traditionally a location they visit at the end of the breeding season before migrating further south, on five dates between 4 – 20 Aug. Single Terns were also noted at Alviso ponds A10/A11 on 12 Aug (PH) and 2 Sept (HF, ChS, JiS). In contrast to the dismal showing of Least Terns, **Elegant Terns** came north in numbers, setting a new high count of 64 on 15 Aug at the pond A10/A11 levee remnant, then surpassing that with a count of 71 on 2 Sept (PDu). Single-day counts of over 50 occurred in 2013 – 2015, 2017 and 2021. Two **Common Loons** flying over Monte Bello OSP on 21 Oct were at an unexpected location (SPv, TY, TrG). The same could be said of a **Pelagic Cormorant** found on a closed refuge pond on 27 Sept (CaT). They occur in SF Bay but seldom come as far south as Santa Clara county. This fall is the first time **California Condors** have been seen widely and regularly in the southern part of the county; most sightings were of Condors over the Diablo Range. Their first excursion north was on 24 Aug when two were over Mt Hamilton (EGa). Two were over Canada de los Osos on 14 Sept and again on 5 Oct

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(RH). The westernmost sighting was of two seen from Laguna Ave in Coyote Valley on 13 Oct (JPa). One to two were seen in the vicinity of Casa de Fruta and the southern entrance road to Henry Coe SP above Bell Station on six dates in October, beginning on 9 Oct (MJM, m. ob.).

Kingbirds through Blackbirds

Tropical Kingbirds have been regular in the winter since 2019 – 2020 and have wintered along San Francisquito Creek since the winter of 2020 – 2021. One was there again on 27 Oct (DvG) and into November (m. ob.). An **Eastern Kingbird** was a one-day wonder at the Santa Clara Valley Water District (SCVWD) offices on 20 Aug (BM). This was the 11th county record; 9 of the 11 have made only brief appearances, staying for only one day. The highlight of the period was a new species for the county, a **Dusky Warbler** present between 6 – 8 Oct (SPv, m. ob.) along the Guadalupe River above Montague Expressway. This Eurasian warbler winters in SE

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Dusky Warbler by Jason Tanner

Asia. The previous 23 records in California have all been in the fall from late September to early November. One each of **Lapland** and **Chestnut-collared Longspurs** visited Byxbee Park beginning on 23 Oct (OA). The Lapland Longspur stayed through 26 Oct and the Chestnut-collared stayed through 24 Oct (m. ob.). Five was a good number of **Clay-colored Sparrows** this fall, with individuals found at Monte Bello OSP (SPv) and Lake Vasona CP (GL) on 22 Sept, along Laguna Ave in Coyote Valley on 14 Oct (SPv), at Martial Cottle Park in San Jose on 20 Oct (OA) and at Byxbee Park on 24 Oct (GL). Byxbee Park also hosted a male **Lark Bunting** from 7 – 8 Sept (JGu, MkG). The Bunting was the 8th county record. A **Rusty Blackbird** posed for photographs on 14 Oct (SPv) and then was gone. The Blackbird, along Coyote Creek Trail between Metcalf Rd and Coyote Ranch Rd, was the 3rd county record. Two have been fall transients in October; the third stayed for almost a month one winter.

Warblers through Buntings

The first of the vagrant fall warblers to arrive was a **Northern Waterthrush** on 15 Sept along Calabazas Creek between Mission College and Tasman (MIB). It stayed through 19 Sept (m. ob.). A second Waterthrush was along Stevens Creek above Crittenden Lane on 13 Oct (MMR). A **Tennessee Warbler** toured the neighborhood north of Lake Cunningham Park on 17 Sept (SPv, TY). Another was at Sunnyvale Baylands Park on 20 Sept (OA, RJ). The county's 4th **Virginia's Warbler** spent 27 Sept – 1 Oct along Penitencia Creek trail (ChJ, m. ob.). All four records have been in September. A **Chestnut-sided Warbler** graced Lake Vasona CP between

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18 – 24 Sept (BM, m. ob.). **Single Blackpoll Warblers** visited the Palo Alto Regional Water Quality Control Plant (RWQCP) on 16 Sept (GL) and Lake Vasona CP from 28 – 30 Sept (GL, OA). A **Palm Warbler** strutted about the Shoreline Golf Course on 29 Sept (RPh) while two sashayed to and fro at Byxbee Park between 29 Sept and 2 Oct (JM, m. ob.). Singles were found at the SCVWD on 8 Oct (SPv, BN), along Laguna Ave in Coyote Valley on 14 Oct (SPv) and 30 Oct (MJM) and along San Francisquito Creek below Geng Rd beginning on 29 Oct (KR). The last of these has remained into November. **Summer Tanagers** put in brief appearances beginning with one on 20 Jul at the SCVWD (TCh, EvM). Another was heard-only at Lake Vasona CP on 28 Jul (JPa). The same heard-only status

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Painted Bunting by Garrett Lau

applied to a Tanager at Lake Vasona CP on 29 Sept (MDo). The fourth Tanager of the period was at Agnews Historical Park from 6 – 7 Oct (RJ, m. ob.). An incursion of **Painted Buntings** this fall has no precedent. Four Buntings equaled the number of previous county records, arriving in a window of less than two weeks. The Buntings were found on 6 Sept at Lake Vasona CP (AMe), 8 Sept in a backyard in Sunnyvale (MIB), 10 Sept along Stevens Creek above Crittenden Lane

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(MMR) and 16 - 17 Sept at the Palo Alto RWQCP (ABu). Only one stayed for longer than a day.

Observers: Ozzie Altus (OA), Melanie Barnett (MIB), Bob Bolles (BB), Adam Burnett (ABu), Teresa Cheng (TCh), Alice Church (ACh), Matthew Dodder (MDo), Pete Dunten (PDu), Howard Friedman (HF), Liz Frith (LzF), Marc Galvez (MkG), Tricia Gardner (TrG), Carter Gasiorowski (CG), Elinor Gates (EGa), Davena Gentry (DvG), Jose Guerra (JGu), Peter Hart (PH), Rick Herder (RH), Richard Jeffers (RJ), Chris Johnson (ChJ), Garrett Lau (GL), Ryan Ludman (RLu), Mike Mammoser (MJM), Eve Meier (EvM), Andy Melnick (AMe), Brooke Miller (BM), Julio Mulero (JM), Becca Nelson (BN), Janna Pauser (JPa), Sergey Pavlov (SPv), Ryan Phillips (RPh), Mike Rogers (MMR), Steve Rottenborn (SCR), Karen Rush (KR), Stephen Shank (StS), Aiden Sinha (ASi), Charles Sismondo (ChS), Jillian Sismondo (JiS), Cameron Tescher (CaT), Loni Ye (LY), Tristan Yoo (TY), Horace Zhang (HZ)

Young Birders Club

Allison Cheng and
Valerie Wong
Co-leads



The Young Birders Club at the Palo Alto Baylands

The YBC

Since the Young Birders Club officially launched in August of this year, we have gotten closer to realizing our goal: to create a friendly, inclusive birding community for the next generation. In the past few months, we have held field trips all over the Bay Area, from the Palo Alto Baylands and Shoreline Lake to McClellan Ranch, Hellyer Park, and the Stanford Arizona Cactus Garden. Serving over 40 young birders from Santa Clara County and beyond, we have reached families from the South Bay, East Bay and San Francisco. We delight in leading events for our diverse population of participants from all walks of life, from children to teens to adults.

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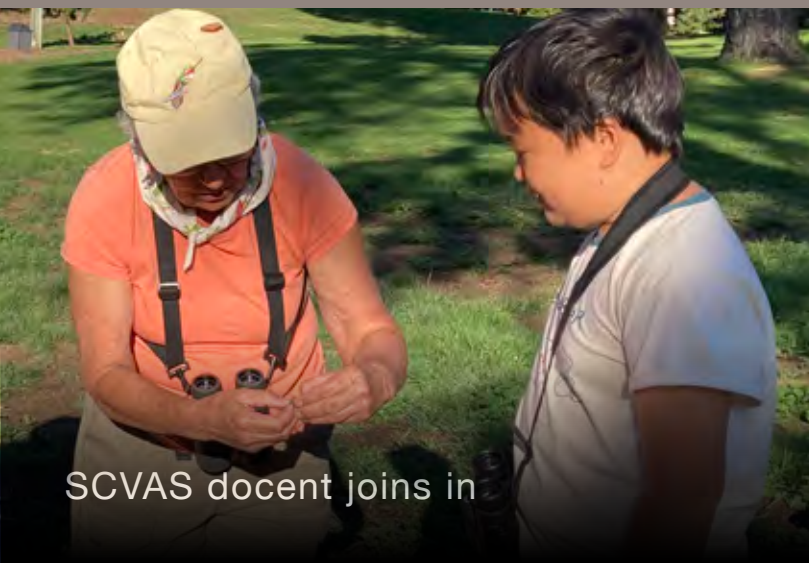
We are excited to have expanded so quickly, and very proud to be a part of this devoted community sharing our love for birds and conservation. Our efforts have even been recognized locally—we were recently interviewed and published in the Los Altos Town Crier (read our article [here](#))!

What we've been up to

The last few months have been filled with a variety of engaging field trips and workshops, many of them led by our own members. Young birders have taken initiative to lead field trips at McClellan Ranch and Cuesta Park as well as bird-related workshops showcasing their diverse creative talents. We are overjoyed to have been able to create not only a place for young birders to learn from others, but to grow themselves as leaders and communicators.

With the help of experienced docents from SCVAS and Environmental Volunteers, along with the ability for young birders to borrow binoculars and field guides, we have increased access to useful resources so that everyone can experience the joy of birding. We hope to continue providing members with new opportunities, knowledge, and connections so that they can further their own birding journey.

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SCVAS docent joins in



Origami with the YBC



What's next?

As we enter the next few months, the Young Birders Club will offer even more exciting educational opportunities for young birders. These include field trips to new locations, collaborations with more experienced birders and environmental organizations, and possibly day trips to sites beyond Santa Clara County and the South Bay. We also look forward to hosting events involving young birders in community science and local habitat restoration. Whether you are a birder, photographer, nature-lover or supportive parent, our opportunities are for anyone and everyone.

From allowing young birders to meet like-minded youth, see cool birds, and express their creativity through photography and art, we are so proud of everything we've been able to accomplish since our launch—and we don't intend on stopping anytime soon. Stay tuned as the Young Birders Club continues to grow, always promoting conservation and care for birds within the younger generation.

Cause for Celebration!

Teresa Cheng
SCVAS volunteer



The 2023 September Bird Celebration Art and Photo Gallery is live! Enjoy images of Bay Area birds as seen by local photographers and artists by viewing the gallery at: <https://www.smugmug.com/gallery/n-2tw6v>.

The September Bird Celebration was enthusiastically supported by 49 photographers and artists who contributed 238 images. Subjects ranged from the familiar Black Phoebe and Western Bluebird to the rare Sabine's Gull and Virginia's Warbler. Participants ranged from experienced birders to new birders to young birders including one as young as 10 years old.

Thanks to everyone who helped to make this event a success!

Field trips

Howard Friedman
SCVAS Field Trip Leader



Howard Friedman in the wild

Why I love leading field trips for SCVAS

I truly love solitude when I can get it. Bird-watching has provided me with alone time, for more than 5 decades. Solo is what I have been for much of my life as a bird-watcher. It is the only time I make for quieting myself. That is a big deal for an extreme extrovert like myself! It's not that I love hearing myself talk, but I love parties and gatherings. Being with family and friends means the world to me. When I moved into my neighborhood in the Rose Garden neighborhood of San Jose 17 years ago, one of my neighbors had commented to me after our first week there, that I knew more neighbors in my first week, than they knew in the 26 years they lived there.

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I had been an on again off again member of SCVAS/Audubon for more than 40 years. My interactions with the organization were working at Alum Rock Park, Lake Cunningham, and Mt. Hamilton Christmas Bird Counts. These events were much anticipated and I looked forward to meeting new people, helping others who were new to birding, and taking my family and friends along for the exploits. I did get the chance to work with Bill Bousman on the Santa Clara County Breeding Bird Atlas where I had the chance to meet and work with Mike Rogers back in the mid 1980s. These were really isolated events.

Birding is very cathartic and sublime. Being out in the world, focused on finding what must be revealed, what must be accepted, being in the now, puts life into a beautiful perspective. Solitude and being by oneself is so empowering. Then I retired from teaching elementary school.

What a relief to be free from that commitment. Life being liberated from a bureaucracy. What a nice and relaxing mode. Then I thought that I need to give back to the community. I needed to do something for others. I read the Avocet or something else, I don't remember exactly, but I saw a call for trip leaders for excursions from SCVAS. I happened to see Matthew Dodder in the field and asked him about the chance to get involved. He gently gave me the run down and whom to contact (Eve) to become a lead for trips. The rest is history as it is said.

What I discovered by co-leading and leading trips is the joy, connection, warmth, and responsibility that birding with a group has given me. I love working with my colleagues in the field.

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They have so many different personalities and qualities to admire and enjoy. Working for a similar purpose helping others is just fulfilling in so many ways. Knowing I have people with whom I share this love of birds and a love of sharing about birds with others has helped me find good in the world and purpose. Helping new birders is a huge gift. Seeing their faces and astonishment or satisfaction of finding a difficult bird to spot or having a life bird that day, is a great experience to share with someone.

What really is the most significant aspect of doing this volunteering is working with the people who look forward to going on these outings to find birds, connect with nature, and be with others who share the same purpose. What I discovered is how much I love birding in a group. Having extra eyes, ears, and knowledge makes the event more fun, meaningful, and interesting. Some trips are quiet, some more social, but all of them are worthwhile and profoundly beautiful for me.

I still love those times I am by myself having a walk connected to nature. What I have found is that I need to be part of a group. Being connected to other people for the love of birds, nature, and our world is equally part of my birding routine. A feeling of gratitude is what comes over me when I have the opportunity to work as a co-leader or leader at SCVAS.

What a year it's been!

Liz Frith
SCVAS Volunteer

In December 2022, as I pondered New Year's resolutions, a notion took root within me—an ambition to hone my skills as a birder. For a long time, I had felt a sense of stagnation and frustration. I could readily identify numerous common species, but I felt overwhelmed by the smaller shorebirds, seasonal warblers, and other less common yet year-round birds. A thought persisted: What if I set a goal for this year, one that draws me outdoors more often into nature, pushing me to learn more about some of the more challenging species? In preparation, I visited the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society website and reviewed the county checklist, noting the number of common and uncommon species.

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Curlew Sandpiper.
Photo by Liz Frith

My aspiration was clear: a goal that did not rely on tracking down rare species, as that realm seemed reserved for the seasoned birders, a group I held in awe. A target of 175 species appeared both ambitious and achievable, requiring the identification of 3-4 species every week.

January marked the start of my challenge, a slow beginning that gravitated towards familiar locales like Shoreline Lake and Charleston Slough. Swiftly, I checked off numerous duck species and the more readily identifiable shorebirds. My gaze, once casually indifferent to the peeps, had now become an intent study of the subtle nuances in plumage and size. As I observed fellow birders, adorned with their binoculars strolling past me, I gathered the courage to seek their guidance when I struggled with a tricky identification. Other times, I took photos and studied them at home, comparing them against other photos in eBird and my field guides to make an ID. As the weeks passed, species that had once challenged me became more familiar.

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Telling the difference between Lesser/Greater Yellowlegs and Least/Western Sandpipers, for example, became easier. I started to see real progress!

And then, in late February, a conversation with a fellow birder in the field changed the trajectory of my year. I was asked if I had seen the Painted Redstart.

“No,” I replied with a shake of the head. While I had noticed the reports on the South Bay Birds email list, I had not planned to search for this bird. It seemed too challenging, not within the scope of birdwatchers like me. Rarities were treasures reserved for the advanced birders.

Yet, a day or two later, with only a couple of hours to spare for birding, a thought crept into my mind, “Why *not* venture over there and see if I can spot it?” Others had shared the approximate coordinates, and the Redstart

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had been reported regularly for a couple of months. It was very likely still there. Maybe I should try for it?

Upon my arrival, I noticed a pair of birders scanning the area, and despite my self-doubt, I approached them. A peculiar aspect of such encounters, I discovered, was the absence of formal introductions or small talk. A simple question sufficed: “Have you seen it?” When you referred to “it,” anyone in the vicinity wielding binoculars instantly comprehended. In this instance, “it” was the Painted Redstart, a scarlet-bellied warbler typically found in the southwestern US and Mexico. After twenty minutes of searching, I detected movement within a nearby tree, and to my delight, the Painted Redstart came into view. “Over here!” I beckoned to the others. I was astonished; I had successfully located the bird on my own!

Looking back now, I recognize that it is possible to have more than one “spark” bird. A spark bird, for the uninitiated, is that extraordinary avian encounter that sets a new birder’s heart aflame with curiosity. Typically, acquiring a pair of binoculars shortly follows, signifying the genesis of one’s birding journey.

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White-winged Scoter.
Photo by Liz Frith

My original spark bird was a Lesser Goldfinch, spotted a few feet outside my office window several years ago. “Wow, what is this beautiful yellow-green bird?” I wondered, and that moment was akin to the scene in “The Wizard of Oz” when the film transcends from black and white to vivid color. A new, breathtaking world appeared before me, and from then on, I couldn’t help but notice birds everywhere I went. I enrolled in a handful of Audubon field trips and attended a few classes, but birdwatching remained a casual hobby until this year.

The Painted Redstart was my second spark bird, inspiring the confidence that I could go out and find rare reported county birds with some success. I discovered that I knew more than I had realized. All of the time I’ve spent observing the more

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Osprey.
Photo by Liz Frith



Clay-colored Sparrow.
Photo by Liz Frith

common birds proved worthwhile. Over this year, I've come to find that picking out the unique features of these uncommon birds happened more naturally than I thought possible, especially when you compare them against our common —but very much beloved— Santa Clara County species.

To date, my Santa Clara County tally for the year stands at 237 species, far exceeding my initial target of 175. I've submitted 142 eBird checklists and counting. Along the way, I signed up for several SCVAS field trips and online classes to strengthen my identification skills. I also participated in SCVAS's Spring Birdathon and ventured into new territory by trying birding by bike, a wholly novel experience for me. And over the last several months, I've seen and appreciated several rare birds in the county. In addition to the Painted Redstart, I've checked off a Tropical Kingbird, a Long-Tailed Duck, a White-Winged Scoter, a Vermillion Flycatcher, a Baird's Sandpiper, a Curlew Sandpiper, a Painted Bunting, a Sabine's Gull, and a Dusky Warbler, among many others. My familiarity with the Santa

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Clara County parks and their resident and seasonal species has deepened substantially. My challenge this year pushed me to visit new places in Santa Clara County like TJ Martin Park (where I saw my first Chipping Sparrow and Lark Sparrow), Pacheco State Park (first Lewis's Woodpecker), Coyote Lake (first Canyon Wren), Calero Reservoir (first county Purple Martin), Santa Teresa County Park (first Horned Lark, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Grasshopper Sparrow, and Common Poorwill), and Guadalupe Oak Grove Park (first county Phainopepla), among other places. I am now the type of birder who keeps my binoculars and a change of clothes in my car—you just never know what will show up and when.

This year, I've had the privilege of meeting numerous birders, novice and skilled, each imparting valuable knowledge and providing much encouragement and camaraderie along the way. And while the shadow of imposter syndrome occasionally looms and encounters with more advanced birders can still be intimidating at times, I've come to understand that this is a community I belong to. These pursuits are not exclusive to seasoned birders—far from it. They require only curiosity and a measure of patience, qualities found in the heart of every birder. We **all** belong, no matter the skill level.

“The Lost Birds”

Hugh McDevitt
SCVAS Volunteer



Great Auk installation.
Photo by Hugh McDevitt

At the Intersection of Extinction and the Visual and Musical Arts

The Stanford University campus is alive with the presence and noise of human activity this fall morning—trucks and cars, construction projects, students and faculty on their phones. But on Museum Way—a small street that bisects busy Palm Avenue and connects the Bing Concert Hall and the Cantor Art Museum—the surroundings are quieter, and you can hear the calls of local birds—Northern Flicker, Acorn Woodpecker, White-breasted Nuthatch, Dark-eyed Junco. Among the live oak trees that are scattered about this area of campus sit bronze sculptures of five birds who are forever lost to us.

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Passenger Pigeon



Labrador Duck

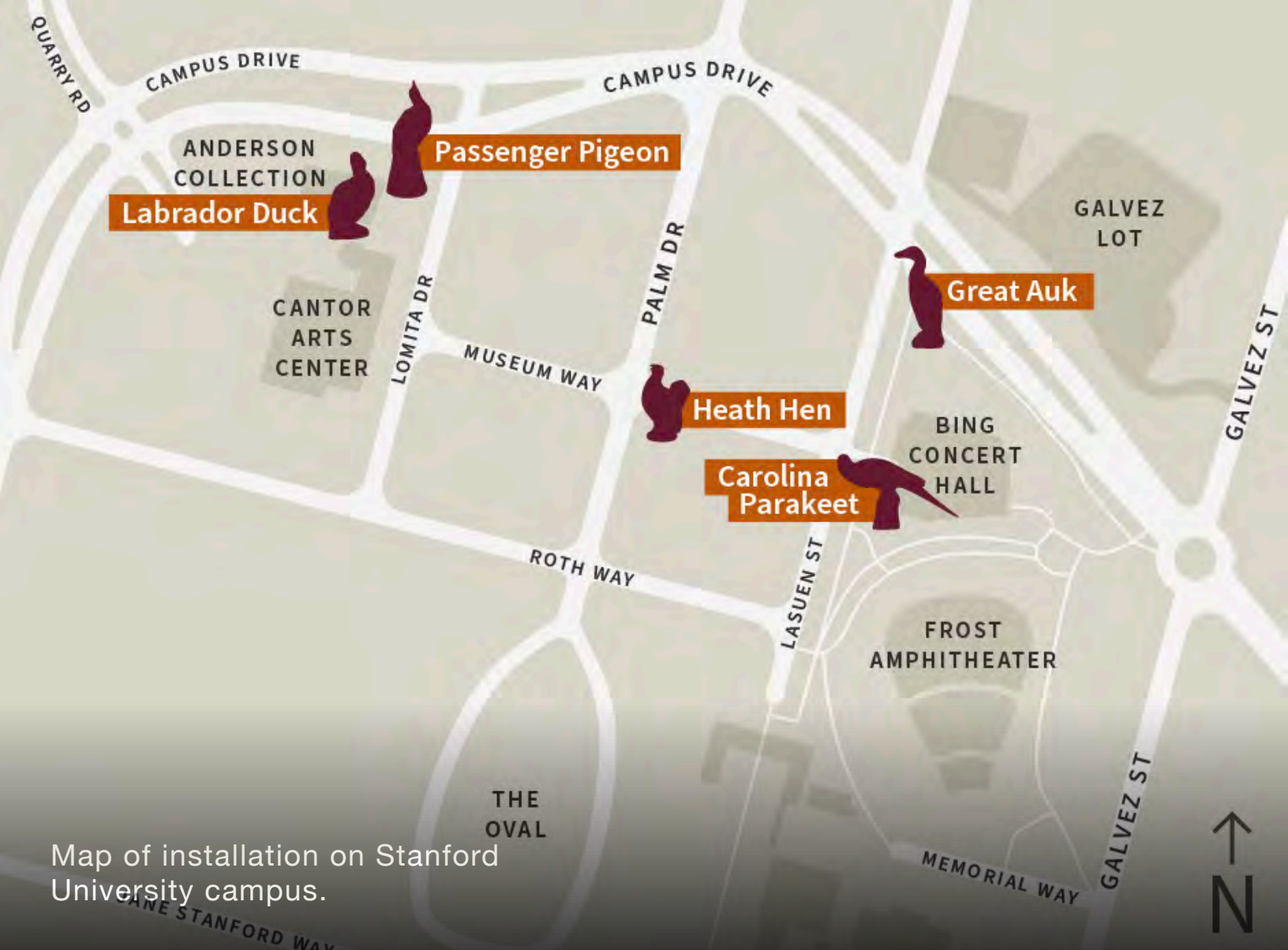


Heath Hen



Last known location for these Lost Birds. Map from Stanford University.

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Map of installation on Stanford University campus.

Artist and filmmaker Todd McGrain created these sculptures of “The Lost Birds” to memorialize species that have been lost and awaken us to the continuing threat to thousands of species of plants, insects, and animals from human destruction.

Situated near the concert hall and arts center, the large statues of the Great Auk, Passenger Pigeon, Carolina Parakeet, Heath Hen, and Labrador Duck dominate their immediate surroundings, but, with their dark color and the shade often cast on them by surrounding trees, they can disappear when

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viewed from a distance. The loneliness of the solitary statues contrasts the disappearance of these species with the vital activity of bird life around the campus. McGrain hopes that these sculptures can “be an open door or a literal touchstone to the stories of these birds and... a way in to thinking about our past and making us more sensitive to conserving what we still have.”

As part of the weekend celebrating the installation of “The Lost Birds” statues at Stanford, Grammy-award-winning composer and Stanford alumnus Christopher Tin’s latest musical project, also titled “The Lost Birds,” was performed by the acclaimed British vocal group Voces8. Tin first came to prominence with his Grammy-winning composition “Baba Yetu” for the video game “Civilization IV.” He writes that “‘The Lost Birds’ is a memorial for their loss, and the loss of other species due to human activity. It’s a celebration of their beauty—as symbols of hope, peace, and renewal. But it also mourns their absence—through the lonely branches of a tree, or the fading echoes of distant bird cries.” The work—based on the poetry of Emily Dickinson, Christina Rossetti, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Sara Teasdale—depicts a world of massive changes, both for the human and natural inhabitants.

My wife, Deb, and I had the thrill of experiencing this music at the February 2023 concert in the superb acoustics of Bing Concert Hall. As haunting as the instrumental movements of “The Lost Birds,” including the opening “Flocks a Mile Wide” are, the power of the twelve-movement composition lies in the marriage of the texts of loss and hope with Tin’s soaring melodies and poignant harmonies. Starting with Dickinson’s

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“The Saddest Noise” (“The saddest noise, the sweetest noise, the maddest noise that grows and grows—The birds they make it in the spring,”) and ending with “Hope Is a Thing With Feathers,” listeners accompany the singers on a sonic journey through seasons and years of intertwined experience with the natural world and its life and loss.

What does it mean to lose a species? Lose an ecosystem? What does it matter to us today that we can’t experience the thrill of seeing the Carolina Parakeet or immense flocks of Passenger Pigeons? How will visitors to the Hawaiian Islands in 50 years be impacted by the disappearance of dozens of species of native Honeycreepers? The statues of Todd McGrain and music of Christopher Tin don’t give us answers to these questions, but they invite us into a visual and aural environment that is at once filled with a sense of loss and hope.

“The Lost Birds” statues can be seen on the Stanford campus until February 1, 2024. More information about the statues and their campus locations can be found here: <https://live.stanford.edu/content/lost-bird-project>.

“The Lost Birds” music can be found on YouTube and streaming music platforms. I highly recommend taking the time to listen to the entire work.

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Gifts received August 1 through October 31, 2023

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New Members August thru October 2023

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Jay Wang
Yiwei Wang
Junyan Wang
Lou Weeks
Elaine Wilhelm
Wenyi Wong
Mikayla Yang

Save the Date



Upcoming classes and presentations
Sign-ups will be announced soon.

Waterfowl ID (3-part series)
Mondays, January 8, 15, 22

Icterids ID
Monday, February 12

Sparrows ID (3-part series)
Mondays, March 4, 11, 18

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