



Mendocino Coast Audubon Society Newsletter, October 2012

ONCE AND FUTURE GIANTS

WHAT ICE AGE EXTINCTIONS TELL US ABOUT THE FATE OF EARTH'S LARGEST ANIMALS

Fort Bragg Town Hall

October 15, 2012 7pm

When she was a kid growing up in Chicago, Sharon Levy used to fantasize that the mastodons whose bones lay deep under the pavement would rise out of the earth and rampage down Lake Shore Drive. Decades later, she began reporting on a group of quirky scientists who were reconstructing the lost world of the mastodon in remarkable detail—using everything from prehistoric poop to the DNA preserved in ancient fur. Most of them shared her dreams of snuffling, roaring Ice Age giants, and a few believed they could really bring that world back to life.



Saber Tooth Cat skull

Sharon specializes in making the science behind natural resource and conservation issues come alive for a general audience. For the past nineteen years, she has covered environmental issues of all kinds: the ecology of top predators, sewage recycling, bioengineered mosquitoes, archaeological evidence of ancient human impacts on wildlife and fisheries. Sharon is the author of, *Once and Future Giants: what Ice Age extinctions tell us about the fate of Earth's largest animals* from Oxford University Press.



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Black Oystercatcher nest with eggs.
Photo by Donald Shephard



PRESIDENT'S CORNER

David Jensen

This afternoon the temperature nearly reached 100 in Ukiah, where I now spend most of my days. Yet despite the summer-like conditions, there has lately been stirring inside me the uneasy nostalgic yearning, introspection and wanderlust that afflict me each fall without fail. In my humble but infallible opinion, this is the best time of year to be alive, and certainly the best time to be a birder along our coast.

Unfortunately, I have mostly birded vicariously through others lately. Duty calls and my health insurance policy says I have to answer. I've grown a bit jealous this past week as my fellow birders have posted their observations on Mendobirds*: Red-throated Pipit, White-throated Swift, Black-throated Sparrow, Blackpoll Warbler, Yellow-headed Blackbird, White-faced Ibis, all leaving me green-faced with envy. But I will join them very shortly, and I hope that you will join me.

I want to encourage each of you to join us on one of our field trips or bird walks this fall. The coast will soon be alive again with the rich variety of wintering sparrows, hawks, falcons, ducks and loons. If you cannot go with us on the appointed days, please take an hour or two to visit Lake Cleone, Point Cabrillo, Russian Gulch or another local park (they are still open and some are still free). An even easier option is to walk along the comfortable boardwalk to the observation platform at Laguna Point in MacKerricher Park. There are benches at the end and the waves of migrating loons and ducks after the first big winter storms in Oregon are a fantastic sight. If nothing else, please be aware of the little birds that suddenly appear in and under the shrubs in your yard.

There is a scene in that haunting film *The Silence of the Lambs* in which Clarice Starling asks Hannibal Lecter to help identify the evil Buffalo Bill. He tells her that Bill covets his victims and asks her, "And how do we begin to covet? . . . We covet the things we see."

We not only covet the things we see, we also come to love, treasure and ultimately protect the things that we see. Therein lies one of the great keys to conservation – exposure leads to familiarity, then to appreciation, and then to concern and protection. It is a natural progression which cannot be denied. Familiarity does not breed contempt, it breeds allegiance.

As a card-carrying member of Audubon, I am philosophically concerned about the Bachman's Sparrow and Bicknell's Thrush, but I have actually written letters of support to Congress on behalf of the Marbled Murrelet and California Condor, species with which I am familiar. I hope to see a Gunnison Sage-Grouse and Kirtland's Warbler before they disappear, but I have actually written a check to help preserve our local Black Oystercatchers and Snowy Plovers. We feel more deeply about the things we know.

So please, get to know the birds around you. Fall is the perfect time to observe and become familiar with birds that have been returning to this area for tens of thousands of years. You will quickly learn to appreciate them, even the little brown ones that at first all look alike. Before long you will become concerned for their survival and help us to protect them. Like so many great love affairs, it starts with a look.

* Mendobirds is a free email distribution group. Members can post their sightings to inform others about birds they have seen, primarily in Mendocino County, or to advertise special events such as upcoming programs or field trips. For more information, go to <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/MENDOBIRDS>.

PAM HUNTLEY ON KZYX FM 88.3, 90.7, AND 91.5

Although blue, and a jay, our black-crested raucous friend is named Steller's Jay after the German explorer, Georg Wilhelm Steller, who, on an Arctic expedition in 1741, first "collected" this type of jay. This bird and its raspy call are known to most of us, as it has adapted remarkably well to humans. It is often seen on low branches around campsites or our yards waiting for its opportunity to snatch up any part of our lunch or a bite of dog food.

The Steller's Jay has a dusky-black head, crest and back, and a dark blue body with heavily barred wings and tail. My favorite part is the beautiful forehead with its turquoise stripes. Males and females look alike.

In spring, rowdy flocks change to quiet secretive pairs at their nesting sites. The female incubates three to six light blue-green speckled eggs and is fed by the male.

The Steller's and the Blue Jay of the East Coast are the only jays with a crest and the only New World jays that use mud in their nests. The Blue Jay has expanded its range westward and where the two overlap they occasionally interbreed and produce hybrids.

These jays produce a scream that sounds amazingly like a Red-tailed Hawk. It is thought to be used to scare small songbirds from their nests, allowing jay to fly in and eats the eggs or nestlings.



Steller's Jay. Photo by Ron LeValley

www.LeValleyphoto.com

A GENTLE REMINDER

Membership Chair, Charlene MacAllister

Thanks to all who have renewed their membership. For those who haven't yet done so, there is still time. If you have any question, call or write Charlene at charmac@mcn.org 937-4463



A CORRECTION

With apologies to "Sweet Verbena," who appeared in last month's SOS story. The aptly-named marine mammal is a Northern Elephant Seal (not a Northern Fur Seal). She selected Ten Mile Beach for more than two weeks in July as the perfect place to molt. Here she is on July 13 lounging near her favorite coastal dune plant – cleverly disguised as a driftwood log.

SNOWY CLOVERS: or How I Spent My Summer Vacation**Teresa Hurray**

Ranger Teresa Hurray and junior rangers
Photo by Angela Leibenberg

Animals are funny. Kids can be funnier. I just spent my third summer with California State Parks teaching Junior Rangers about birds and animals while simultaneously strengthening the "smiley" muscles in my face. This year's class topic was specifically restricted to our little Western Snowy Plover--or so I thought.

"My name is Ranger T." Shortened because my real last name solicits hours of yelling "HURRAY!!!" at the top of their lungs. And you have to use the word "Ranger"-- to kids a recognizable nature-authority-person-symbol--

because 7-12 year-olds are completely puzzled by "Interpreter" Teresa.

"Do you, like, translate bird language into English?"

I ask the kids what we are going to talk about and get the following samples of subject matter:

"Soarbirds. Birds that fly real, real, real high."

"Sore birds. Birds that are hurt so ranger guys gotta fix 'em."

"Snorebirds." A misprint from the visitor center announcement board.

"Shore burps!" (giggle, giggle, giggle)

And their most frequent and my personal favorite answer, "Snowy Clovers."

"Well", I ask, "what is a Snowy Plover?"

"Grass, lucky, but only if he has four leafs."

Finally a triumphant twelve year old with a smug look would proclaim, " It's a small threatened shorebird who nests here at MacKerricher State Park and needs our help protecting it."

"And what does he look like, Jacob?"

"Uh, he's green. Like clover."

"Nuh uh!" from another kid, "He's white as snow!!!"

And a third chimes in, "Well, if he likes snow so much then why is he at the beach?"

"What do Snowy Plovers eat?"

"Grass and birdseed."

"Huuuuuuge fish!"

"Shells."

"Seaweed."

"Mushrooms."

SNOWY CLOVERS: or How I Spent My Summer Vacation

continued

"Sausage!"

"Crunch-stations!!!--You know, crabs and stuff."

"Clovers."

Sigh...

"Where do our Snowy Plovers live?"

"In the snow."

"In sand caves."

"In fields where cows are. You know, the Clover cows."

"In the capitol of California."

"At Ranger T's house coz they're undangered and she has to take care of them."

Then usually I had to restrain the adult, who got so into the program that he was jumping up and down raising his hand yelling, "Oh! OH!, I know! I know! Ranger T, Ranger T, pick me!!", forgetting the 7-12 thing and forgetting he wasn't getting a Jr. Ranger sticker.

"Ok, after learning all this today, how can you help our Plovers?"

"Don't poke sticks in their eyes"

"Keep your dog and your kids on a leash."

"Don't bring Godzilla to the beach."

(C'mon, c'mon, twelve year old, please? Ah here he is...)

"Do not bother their nests, eggs, babies, be careful with horses, dogs should be on leash, and respect their space. Tell a Ranger if you see a nesting area...or if they have to go to the bathroom."

Well, almost.

After our Plover chick race, where everyone runs down to the surf line, stops, pecks to eat their kelp flies and "crunch-stations", and then runs back to the "nest", we go back to the Lake Cleone picnic table for our Junior Ranger initiation ceremony.

The kids learned a lot this summer about a special little bird and I had more than my share of fun helping them. But I still had to remind them as they proudly don their shiny new Jr. Ranger badges that they HAVE to ask their Mom before they arrest somebody for bothering our animals.



Snowy Plover. Photo by Ron LeValley
www.LeValleyphoto.com

Junior Rangers photo by Becky Bowen



THE BLACK OYSTERCATCHER

Donald Shephard



Tundra Swan (Whistling Swan). Photo Ron LeValley, www.LeValleyphoto.com

Why has the MCAS board changed the name of the *Whistling Swan* to *The Black Oystercatcher*? After all, swans are larger, more iconic and immortalized by Hans Christian Andersen in his nursery story *The Ugly Duckling*, and by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky with *Swan Lake*. No such fame graces the Black Oystercatcher.

First, let's tidy up a little confusion of names. Some years ago, the Whistling Swan, native to North America and named for the sound made by its wings, was combined with the European Bewick's Swan in the species *Cygnus columbianus*, the Tundra Swan. So Whistling Swan is a populist name, not an official common name. We birders are an esoteric lot: we use the upper case for official common names and lower case for generic or populist names, for example, robin and American Robin. That alone, however is insufficient cause to change our newsletter's name.

Never a common bird here on the coast, a small flock of Tundra Swans migrates to the Stornetta ranch and winters there each year. The size of the flock has diminished lately. In contrast, the work of volunteers from Mendocino Coast Audubon Society and others along the shore, coordinated by California Audubon, shows this area has a major population of Black Oystercatchers. Our beautiful rocky shoreline, so important for artists and tourists, contains the preferred nesting habitat for this shorebird. In fact, only three other shorebird species nest here, and lately only two others.

Joleen Ossello has led our citizen-science project to determine the success of Black Oystercatchers here for the last two years. Happily, the species is more numerous than previously thought, especially, here along the Mendocino coast.

We can all appreciate the clear piping whistles of a pair of Black Oystercatchers defining

THE BLACK OYSTERCATCHER **continued**

their territory in siren-sounding flight around their particular patch of the California Coastal National Monument. I live on a knoll a quarter mile above Caspar Beach and stop gardening whenever their alarm calls rise to me. I wonder at the narrow confines of this long, labyrinthine ecosystem.

If you follow the bluff along the Point Cabrillo Light Station State Historic Park (talk about official names) you will have traveled much farther than a cyclist along the road above, and you will surely see and hear at least fifteen pairs of Black Oystercatchers. Track individual nests as I did and you will sense both the fragility and the strength of this species. I watched as adults tossed pebbles over their shoulder in their nest building courtship ritual. There, with much patience, I waited for the incubation exchanges in order to see first one, then two and finally three eggs. The relief parent warily walks to the incubating adult and quickly takes over. Ravens and gulls watch for the opportunity to feed their own young. After twenty-one days of parental nest sitting three fuzzy chicks emerged: tasty morsels for a raven. Exposed nests offer no cover so the chicks quickly walk away and hide among the cracks and crevices of rock, making it hard for both observers and enemies to find them. If ravens or other predators take the young, the stalwart Black Oystercatchers lay a second clutch, which may also disappear into a raven's beak.

Imagine my joy when I returned from vacation to find a half grown chick, still somewhat downy and with a black beak, on a rock by Frolic Cove. The following week I spotted it on an adjacent mussel bed as it received a lesson on foraging from its parent. It must have flown there, which meant it met the criterion for fledging. Not all eggs hatch and fledge, but enough do to ensure the survival of the species.

There you have it: the Black Oystercatcher is more numerous, stays year round, nests here, and is the subject of one of our citizen-science projects. Of course, nomenclature is also a problem for our new banner bird. Black Oystercatchers from Alaska to about Oregon are entirely black, but southward from there birds show increasing amounts of white feathers and browner (less black) abdomens. which confounds their first name. Further more, they do not catch oysters, which is just as well, as we have none here. Rather, they feed on the amphipods and worms that forage between the protecting shells of mussels.

Misnamed or not, we bid goodbye to *The Whistling Swan* and long live *The Black Oystercatcher*.

Black Oystercatcher and chicks. Photo Ron LeValley
www.LeValleyphoto.com



EVENTS



Western Sandpiper photo by Ron LeValley
www.LeValleyphoto.com

The Mendocino Coast Audubon Society hosts two bird walks each month at the Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens. We hold our monthly beginner's bird walk on the first Saturday of the month, and our midweek walk on the third Wednesday. Each month we offer at least one field trip, which is held on the second weekend of the month. Special field trips are occasionally held throughout the year. The location of each field trip varies according to the seasonal distribution of the birds. Birders with all levels of experience are invited to attend these events.

Binoculars will be available for those who need them.

The October field trip will focus on the birds of Glass Beach. Participants should meet on Sunday, October 14, at 8 am at the west end of Elm Street (turn west from Highway 1 at the Denny's restaurant at the north end of Fort Bragg). This is an exciting time of year to look for shorebirds, and the knowledgeable leaders will help identify the various "peeps." This field trip should end by noon.

October 6, Saturday. Beginners' Bird Walk: 9:00 a.m. at Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens. Admission is free to Gardens members.

October 14, Sunday. Field trip to Glass Beach: 8:00 a.m. meet at the west end of Elm Street in Fort Bragg (turn west at the Denny's restaurant).

October 17, Wednesday. Bird Walk: 8:00 a.m. at Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens. Admission is free to Gardens members.

November 3, Saturday. Beginners' Bird Walk: 9:00 a.m. at Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens. Admission is free to Gardens members.

Least Sandpiper photo by Ron LeValley
www.LeValleyphoto.com



THANK YOU BLOY SURVEYORS Joleen Ossello

The 2012 summer breeding season of the Black Oystercatcher has officially ended. Twenty local bird-loving volunteers banded together along the coast to observe this shorebird's nesting behavior. Each contributed greatly to conservation by tracking the Mendocino population, and closely observing forty-four individual families. Surveyors performed weekly nest success surveys between May and September using binoculars and scopes, and for thirty minutes of observation at each nest site.

I gratefully thank the following for their dedication of time and effort; and hope they too, had an enriching experience: Trudy Jensen, Art Morley, Gail Nsentip, Jean Mann, Alison Cebula, Adam Hutchins, Donald Shephard, Susan Tubbesing, Cate Hawthorne, Jeff Laxier, Linda Perkins, Bill Heil, Louise Mariana, Randy Farris, Dorothy "Toby" Tobkin, Terra Fuller, Carolyn Kinet, David Jensen, Judy Steele, Charlene McAllister and Ron LeValley.



 **Trudy Jensen searching for chicks at Laguna Point nest, MacKerricher State Park**
Trudy Jensen searching for chicks at Laguna Point nest, MacKerricher State

THE CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT IS FREE Tim Bray

National Audubon Society recently announced two significant changes to the Christmas Bird Count program: They will no longer charge participants \$5 for the privilege of counting birds, and they will no longer print and mail *American Birds* in magazine format (the summary results from all CBCs will now be made available online only).

Audubon's fee policy has been a source of puzzlement and irritation for years, and this compiler is very happy to see it go away. MCAS has one less expense to worry about as well. Now we can put all our energies into the business of identifying and counting birds, and compiling the birds.

MCAS will conduct two CBCs this year. The Fort Bragg circle will be counted on Saturday, December 22, 2012 for the second official year. One week later, on Saturday January 29, 2012, the South Coast circle (centered on Manchester) will be counted for the 30th consecutive time. These are both very productive Counts; with teams of experienced birders exploring known bird-holding habitats, we typically find at least 130 different species and count over 10,000 individual birds.

To join this exciting activity, contact the Compilers for each count: Tim Bray (tbray@wildblue.net) for the Fort Bragg CBC, or David Jensen (djensen@mcn.org) for the South Coast CBC.

MCAS BOARD MEMBERS AND PROGRAM CHAIRS 2011-2012

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At large	Tim Bray	937-4422	tbray@wildblue.net
At large	Cate Hawthorne	962-1623	thorn91@hotmail.com

MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the Mendocino Coast Audubon Society is to help people appreciate and enjoy native birds, and to conserve and restore local ecosystems for the benefit of native birds and other wildlife.

MENDOCINO COAST AUDUBON SOCIETY
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