



The Black Oystercatcher

Mendocino Coast Audubon Society Newsletter, October 2013



JOHN MUIR LAWS

**Thinking Like a Naturalist:
Reclaiming the Art of Natural History
October 21, 2013 7p.m. - 8:30 pm
Caspar Community Center**

John Muir Laws will demonstrate simple, fun techniques to study nature. This is a perfect way to learn how to take birding and nature study to the next level.

Naturalist, educator, artist John (Jack) Muir Laws shares his love of the natural world with others. He is a wildlife biologist and a California Academy of Sciences Research Associate.

Since 1984, Jack has taught nature education in California, Wyoming, and Alaska. He teaches us how to improve observation and memory skills and how to heighten our sense of curiosity about the world around us. He will talk to us about conservation, natural history, scientific illustration, and field sketching – “and how to have fun falling more deeply in love with the world.”

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Sarah Grimes on Black Oystercatcher survey. Page 8. J. Ossello Photo

Black Oystercatcher Masthead photo by Ron LeValley

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

Joleen Ossello



Self portrait

Five years ago I attended my first MCAS chapter meeting. I recall the humming swarm of people, standing room only, and a slew of bird enthusiasts. Our September program with Ron LeValley on "Backyard Birds" brought that memory back. It is with your gracious support that we can continue to provide quality speakers on a variety of science-related subjects at the centrally located Caspar Community Center. I look forward to next month's program with John Muir Laws. And as promised, here is a story I wrote while attending the National Audubon Convention in July.

The Fate of Glass Beach Nest #2

A longtime pair of local shorebirds re-unites for another nesting season on their honeymoon rock along the Mendocino Coast in Northern California. Life appears routine at first for the male, Mr. BLOY.

The couple defends its territory by noisily reprimanding and chasing challenging juveniles and elderly winter chums of the same species. After all, this offshore rock has been the nesting site for as long as they remember. Of course to the rest of the seabirds and shorebirds, this rock has no true ownership – that is until May 1. One chick must successfully be fledged from its nest for the Black Oystercatcher couple to succeed.

They stay the course, nesting and re-nesting until September if they must. The couple innately follows the courtship routine: Engaging head bobs, elated high-pitch chatter, copulation, resting, foraging, rock tossing, laying egg(s). With his bill, Mr. BLOY helps his partner arrange the rocks in the nest just right. As long as she is satisfied, 1-3 eggs will arrive within a week's time. Like clockwork, the couple takes daily flights at low tide within their territory, to their very own rocky intertidal grocery store stocked full of limpets, mussels, and chitons.

Mr. BLOY returns from a routine gluttonous foraging expedition to discover the well-known and pesky Western Gull, Mr. WEGU. He attempts to claim his nest site on the very top of the very same island. Mr. BLOY knows that if desperation strikes, his eggs or chicks can become Mr. WEGU's lunch. This precarious co-existence is in their job description.

By the third week, the couple is taking turns (one incubating and protecting the eggs while the other ventures to the grocery store). Accustomed to humans walking the trail along the headlands, especially in sunny warm weather, Mr. BLOY doesn't get excited unless his chicks are present.

One day while Mr. BLOY is resting his hollow bones, he glimpses a quick flash of black shadow on the rocks beside him. His head tilting sideways, the scene above causes him to flinch.

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Mrs. CORA! That Common Raven is still in the neighborhood. She is a voracious and powerful egg-eater feared by all local egg layers.

Three weeks into incubation, Mr. BLOY rests on his grocery rock, belly full of mollusks, and notices a strange shiny reflection with what appears to be a mummified fish attached. As he follows the reflection by sight toward the mainland, he sees a large human just twenty feet from his partner and their eggs. Mr. BLOY flies in and the couple quickly takes its territorial stance against this offensive breach of personal space when another surprise appears. A blonde and freckled juvenile human comes closer and closer and closer.... there's no time to delay... the couple vocalizes a fierce storm of warning calls while the human dangerously approaches. They have no choice but to protect themselves. They fly away, forced to wait from a nearby location. With chicks near hatching, they know that time spent away from those eggs means failure.

Un-phased by the squawking couple, the juvenile human screeches with joy as he finds bird eggs for the first time in his life. To commemorate, he builds a tower of smooth rocks on a flattened area just ten inches from the nest. Thirty minutes have passed and the juvenile human is summoned by his adult human who is fishing nearby. "28 Inch Ling!" it says.

Mr. BLOY cautiously returns to assess the damage. He sees an empty nest, and a dark shadow from above causes him to flinch. Mrs. CORA has seized the perfect opportunity to enjoy her favorite lunch.

This story is partially fabricated. We monitors are not certain how events unfolded for this nesting pair. We watched this nest for more than a month, but in the end all that remained was the commemorative rock tower. These birds struggle to reproduce in their rocky homes. Unknowingly, human actions increase the difficulties facing nesting shorebirds. While many couples have successful fledges, others will not. Please, share the shores.



Adult tends to chicks at Glass Beach during Mendocino Coast Audubon Society's Black Oystercatcher citizen science project in the summer of 2013. Photo by Dan Knowles

SAVE OUR SHOREBIRDS

In January 2014, we will roll out charts that summarize our observations from June, 2007-December, 2013. The numbers seem dull when we think about the year that has brought so many surprises and delights our way. We offer two extraordinary photographs, both taken at Virgin Creek Beach in September: Richard Hubacek's picture of a Peregrine Falcon on a hunt that cleared all the shorebirds off Virgin Creek Beach September 13 and put a quick end to his survey, and Ron LeValley's picture of a very rare Curlew Sandpiper.



Peregrine Falcon Photo by Richard Hubacek, Green Birding Mendocino.



Curlew Sandpiper observed by inland birder Jerry White at Virgin Creek Beach Friday, September 20, 2013. D. Tobkin reported a probable Curlew Sandpiper sighting March 30, 1997; however, White's report is the first recorded county sighting. Ron LeValley photo www.levalleyphoto.com

Save Our Shorebird surveyors are heroes in our book. Our thanks and appreciation to our members of the 2013 SOS team: Henrietta Bensussen, Becky and Win Bowen, Alison Cebula, Jim Griswold, Karen and Jim Havlena, Bill Heil, Richard Hubacek, Adam Hutchins, Trudy Jensen, Ron LeValley (who was our trainer), Angela Liebenberg, Charlene McAllister, Art Morley, Suzye Ogawa, Renee Pasquini, Linda Perkins, Teresa Shumaker and Dorothy "Toby" Tobkin.

Save Our Shorebirds is an ongoing long-term Mendocino Coast Audubon Society citizen science project in partnership with State Parks and FLOCKworks, now completing its seventh year. Volunteers survey shorebirds on Ten Mile, Virgin Creek and Glass Beach. If you would like to help, please contact Angela Liebenberg at liebenbergs@mcn.org

PAM HUNTLEY ON KZYX FM 88.3, 90.7, AND 91.5 MIGRATION

I like to read accounts of wildlife written by early settlers of California, like this one: "A gunshot would send so many waterfowl into the air that they would darken out the sun for minutes."

We still can experience awe-inspiring sights during migration. In fall and spring we can watch thousands of birds migrating low over the ocean. In fall, you can visit Hawk Hill in Marin County where Golden Gate Raptor Observatory keeps records of migrating hawks as they fly in a slow spiral, waiting to catch updrafts that will carry them across the bay. Some 4,000 Red-tailed Hawks have been recorded this fall, with reports of 19 per hour.

This fall, I strongly encourage you to visit the Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge, a part of which is located next to Interstate 5. Here you can see hundreds of thousands of geese, swans, ducks and even Sandhill Cranes and their young.

The entire trip is made worthwhile in the one moment when thousands of Snow Geese take to the air with a cacophony of flapping wings and cackling calls. It is a taste of what the entire Central Valley autumn was like before the arrival of humans.



Sandhill Cranes at Sacramento River National Wildlife Refuge. USFWS Photo by Justine Belson

Education

4-H GEARS UP FOR BIG OCTOBER

MCAS's mini version of a Big Year is "Big October," a friendly but lively competition among members of 4-H Basic Birding classes taught by Education Chair Sarah Grimes. Jillian Anton, from the South Coast, has won for the past two years (with a total of 76 species last year).

All birders are welcome to join the fun on their own. Keep a checklist and share your numbers at our November chapter meeting. But if you claim Pink Flamingos at Big River, you will need to prove it. *Sarah Grimes*

READER'S CORNER - *The Armchair Birder Goes Coastal: The Secret Lives of Birds of the Southeastern Shore*, by John Yow, University of North Carolina Press, 2012

I found this book at the Fort Bragg Library. It's a readable catalog of shorebirds, many found here during migration. Chapters describe feeding and reproductive behavior, environment, and historical impacts, with insights by Audubon, Bent, Sibley, and Birds of North America Online. Birds covered include Black-bellied Plovers, Ruddy Turnstones, Brown Pelicans, cormorants, Willets, Sanderlings, dowitchers, yellowlegs, Whimbrels, Red Knots, and egrets. *Henri Bensussen*

WILSON'S SNIPE**Donald Shephard**

The Wilson's Snipe is not a difficult bird to identify, if you can find it. Named for the great American ornithologist, Alexander Wilson, who first described the difference between the European Snipe, *Gallinago gallinago* and our species *G. delicata*. In the beginning of the twentieth century, Arthur Cleveland Bent considered our birds a subspecies of the European. In 2003, it was given its own species status. Wilson's Snipe differs from the Common Snipe in having a narrower white trailing edge to the wings, and eight pairs of tail feathers instead of the seven of the Common Snipe.



Wilson's Snipe photo by Sean Breazeal, Talshiarr

Only one species of snipe exists in Britain so, in their arrogance, the English call it Snipe. About 30,000 pairs breed there, but many more flood into the country from Scandinavia and Iceland.

They are well known in the Norfolk fens and similar British wetlands. When I lived in the Central Valley and stopped by vernal pools or the muddy stubble of flooded winter fields, a glance often revealed no activity, but a careful scan with my binoculars showed a variety of shorebirds migrating through. Once again, I saw this round bird with its long beak. Apart from its cryptic coloring, two main reasons account for the uncommon status of Wilson's Snipe. In the early twentieth century, Bent wrote "numbers (of snipe) have been sadly depleted during the past fifty years by excessive shooting." The other cause of decline is the draining of lowland grassland and its conversion to intensive agriculture. As we drain our wetlands, so we diminish the habitat of this species and many others.

In my faithful Sibley's *Field Guide to Birds of Western North America* I have recorded spotting a Wilson's Snipe at Pudding Creek on October 19th, 2008. Becky Bowen tells me she has never recorded one on her Save Our Shorebirds surveys, but saw two on a Christmas Bird Count in Elk in a field behind the Community Center. They were vocal in their annoyance at the human presence while totally ignoring pounding rain.

Wilson's Snipes are beautifully camouflaged, subtly marked with lines and patches of bluff, brown, pale chestnut and black. They have short greenish-grey legs and pointed wings. Bold, cream stripes mark the back. Their strongly striped head and long bill provide instant recognition. Look for the white trailing edges of their wings and white sides of the tail, both most obvious as it brakes for landing. Listen for the harsh *scresh* call, like tearing cloth.

WILSON'S SNIPE

continued

They breed in marshes, bogs, tundra and wet meadows in Canada and the northern United States. They are year-round residents on the northern most U.S. Pacific Coast, but not in Coastal California. The eastern population migrates to the southern United States and to northern South America. It may be that climate change causes these birds to move to their breeding range earlier and leave later than 100 years ago. In Ohio for example, late April was recorded as an average migration date in 1906, but now most of the local population is present on the breeding grounds by that date.

Should you be fortunate enough to visit their breeding grounds, you may witness a flight display, known as "winnowing", in which air rushing through outer tail feathers produces a low pulsing whistle as these birds dives from high. They have been observed "winnowing" throughout the day and long into the night. The "winnowing" sound is similar to the call of a Boreal Owl. They nest in a well-hidden location on the ground.

Here they move slowly through vegetation, probing deep in the mud with a repetitive up-and-down "sewing-machine" motion. Well-camouflaged, they are usually shy and conceal themselves close to ground vegetation, flushing only when approached closely. They fly off in a series of aerial zig-zags to confuse predators. Wilson's Snipes eat insects, earthworms, and other creatures that burrow in wet soil. They also eat leaves and seeds.

If you have not been lucky enough to spot one of these shy and well camouflaged birds, do not give up. Jerry White, a fine inland birder who frequently visits the coast, reported seeing one on Virgin Creek Beach on September 20 and 21. A Pectoral Sandpiper accompanied it.

Jerry also saw a Long-billed Curlew and a Marbled Godwit. Once again local beaches provide infinite pleasure to the keen, observant bird watcher.

Wilson's Snipe
photo by
Ron LeValley
LeValleyphoto.com



© Ron LeValley

BLACK OYSTERCATCHER CITIZEN SCIENCE Joleen Ossello



Officially known as "Team Morley" Black Oystercatcher citizen science researchers at Glass Beach this summer. From left, Leader Art Morley, Jean Mann, Marcia Riwney and Dan Knowles. Photo by Dan Knowles

Community volunteers (new and returning) observed breeding behavior of a well-known local shorebird this summer, the Black Oystercatcher. More than twenty volunteers gathered weekly, from May through September, to monitor individual nest sites of breeding pairs at ten locations along the Mendocino Coast. In its third year, "Project BLOY" was made possible with the help of MCAS chapter volunteers, Audubon California, California State Parks, Bureau of Land Management's California Coastal National

Monument program, and California Department of Fish and Wildlife. While population numbers were stable, the numbers of successfully fledged young decreased from last year. A summary will appear in the next newsletter, and a full report will be posted on the MCAS website by November 1. Interested persons are invited to attend an end-of-year workshop to discuss nesting results, events, and protocol from this year's study on Monday, October 7, at the Russian Gulch Recreation Hall from 10 a.m. to noon. Please RSVP by October 2 to 962-0142 or j_ossello@earthlink.net. Light lunch and beverages provided.



Mendocino Headlands BLOY team: Dave Jensen, Judy Steele
Photo by Joleen Ossello

Surveyors included: David Jensen, Alison Cebula, Adam Hutchins, Bill Delameter, Dan Knowles, Marcy Snyder, Terra Fuller, Marcia Riwney, Linda Perkins, Bill Heil, Don & Colleen Shephard, Judy Steele, Angela Liebenberg, Louise Mariana, Trudy Jensen, Art Morley, Jean Mann, Karen Havlena, Ron LeValley, Charlene McAllister, Sita Noonan, Randy Farris.

CALENDAR – BIRD WALKS AND FIELD TRIPS

Additional calendar information and helpful links at www.mendocinocoastaudubon.org
All chapter meetings open to the public (small donation requested). All board meetings open to members.

October

Saturday, 10/5 Beginner Bird Walk [Botanical Gardens](#) 9AM*

10/5-6 [Humboldt "Mini" Godwit Days](#) Arcata

Saturday, 10/12 Field Trip - Glass Beach and Vicinity 9AM Meet Dorothy "Toby" Tobkin at trail head at foot of Elm Street, Fort Bragg

Saturday 10/12-13 Mackerricher [Lake Cleone Boardwalk Repair](#)

Wednesday, 10/16 Bird Walk [Botanical Gardens](#) 8AM*

Thursday, 10/17 MCAS Board Meeting 7PM Mendocino Hotel

Friday/Saturday, 10/17-18 [Northern California Council Meeting Chico](#)

Monday, 10/21 MCAS Meeting [Caspar Community Center](#) 7PM Speaker: [John Muir Laws](#)

Thinking like a Naturalist: Reclaiming the Art of Natural History

Wednesday, 10/23 John Muir Laws workshop, SPEED DRAWING BIRDS - Have you ever wanted quickly to draw birds in the field, capturing both their energy and the details you can see? This bird sketching workshop will give you tools you need to draw birds on the move. No previous drawing experience necessary. We will begin with sketching fundamentals, adapt these for moving birds, develop an understanding of bird anatomy and proportions, and learn speed drawing tricks. This will be a wonder-filled afternoon of sketching and art instruction to inspire you to create your own field journal or re-inspire you to pick up your sketchbook again. Join artist and naturalist John Muir Laws at 2:30 pm at Ukiah High School 1000 Low Gap Road . Fee is \$45.00 for adults and \$15.00 for students. Teachers admitted free. Register at his [website](#). For further information, contact Helen Menasian: 489-9932 hmenasian@pacific.net

<http://www.johnmuirlaws.com/event/speed-drawing-birds-4>

November

Saturday, 11/2 Beginner Bird Walk [Botanical Gardens](#) 9AM*

Saturday, 11/9 Field Trip 9AM - South Coast Raptors (Elk to Point Arena) meet at Navarro River Parking area to carpool

Monday 11/18 Meeting [Caspar Community Center](#) 7PM Speaker: Greg Guisti – Coastal Pines

Wednesday 11/20 Bird Walk [Botanical Gardens](#) 8:30AM*

Thursday, 11/21 MCAS Board Meeting 7PM Location TBA

December

Saturday 12/7 Beginner Bird Walk at the [Botanical Gardens](#) 9AM*

Saturday 12/14 Field Trip - CBC Tune-up - Rose Memorial Park and Pudding Creek - meet at east end of Spruce Street 9AM

Saturday 12/14 Peregrine Audubon CBC (Ukiah)

Monday 12/16 Meeting [Caspar Community Center](#) 7PM Focusing on the Christmas Bird Count.

Wednesday 12/18 Bird Walk [Botanical Gardens](#) 8:30AM*

Saturday 12/21 [Fort Bragg Christmas Bird Count](#)

January 2014

Saturday 1/4 Beginner Bird Walk [Botanical Gardens](#) 9AM* **Cancelled**

Saturday 1/4 [Manchester Christmas Bird Count](#)

*These walks are free, however the Gardens charges reduced admission for non-Gardens members

MCAS BOARD MEMBERS AND PROGRAM CHAIRS 2013-2014

President	Joleen Ossello	391-7019	j_ossello@earthlink.net
Vice President	David Jensen	964-8163	djensen@mcn.org
Secretary	Cate Hawthorne	962-1623	liquidfusionkayaking@gmail.com
Treasurer	Angela Liebenberg	962-9267	liebenbergs@mcn.org
SOS Program	Angela Liebenberg	962-9267	liebenbergs@mcn.org
Webmaster	Catherine Keegan	937-4422	keegan@wildblue.net
Programs	Charlene McAllister	937-4463	charmac@mcn.org
Conservation	Linda Perkins	937-0903	lperkins@mcn.org
Education	Sarah Grimes	937-4322	zewa@mcn.org
Newsletter	Charlene McAllister	937-4463	charmac@mcn.org
Field Trips	Tim Bray	937-4422	tbray@wildblue.net
Membership	Marybeth Arago	962-0764	mmbargo@mcn.org

Mendocino Coast Audubon Society e-mail address: audubon@mcn.org

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

P.O. BOX 2297

FORT BRAGG, CA, 95437

