

Mendocino Coast Audubon Society Newsletter, November 2012

DAVID LUKAS
speaks on

THE MYSTERY OF BIRD SONG
FORT BRAGG TOWN HALL
Monday, November 19th
7:00 p.m.

How do birds learn to sing such beautiful songs? And why do they produce so many different types of vocalizations? David Lukas will help answer some of these questions and share his insights into the magical world of bird song – from the ways we study bird song, to the anatomy of how birds produce sounds, to some of the social behaviors that explain common bird vocalizations.

David Lukas is a California naturalist and the author of six books, including "Sierra Nevada Birds" and "Sierra Nevada Natural History." David grew up in Oregon but has been living in the Sierra Nevada and leading bird programs in California for nearly 20 years. His newest book, "Bay Area Birds", is the first comprehensive guide to the status, life history, and distribution of all the birds that occur in the Bay Area.

lukasguides.com

Canyon Wren
photo by
Alan Beymer



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PRESIDENT'S CORNER**David Jensen**

In the past, I have used my lines of print to tout the many activities that your chapter has offered. The citizen-science projects, the childhood education efforts, the bird walks, the pelagic trips – a steady flow of challenges and successes to share with you. This month, in the spirit of that famous November holiday, I would like to take the time to thank a few of the people who have helped your chapter accomplish so much for so long.

Our first round of appreciation goes to Marilyn, James and Martin of Out of This World in Mendocino. They have supported this chapter for years with gifts of binoculars for our education program and their generous discounts to chapter members. We are blessed to have an excellent selection of birding optics available in our remote area at prices that beat the big city discount stores. And besides that, they are genuinely nice people. We cannot

thank them enough for the wonderful support they provide this chapter and our community.

Another round of thanks goes to Randy Thornton, the captain of the Telstar. Not only has Randy made his boat available to this chapter at a rate that our members can afford, but his skill, insight, patience and understanding have been critical to the success of our pelagic trips. Randy not only captains the Telstar, but also shares in the adventure and excitement that make our pelagic trips so memorable. He's a true gentleman and friend to this chapter.

Another enthusiastic round of thanks goes to our friends at State Parks. I know they've been criticized lately, and I know that I have been guilty of blaming them for things out of their control, but Loren Rex and the other local employees deserve our thanks for doing their best with their limited resources. They have allowed us to conduct our trainings, breeding surveys, and Christmas counts whenever we've asked. There is a genuine spirit of collaboration at Parks and we need to acknowledge the support they provide us.

Similarly, I thank the Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens for hosting our regular monthly birdwalks. I have no idea how long we have been tromping through their backyard, often before they open to the general public. They are always gracious hosts and should be thanked, not only for their hospitality, but also for maintaining one of the most bird-friendly venues on the coast. Well done, Botanical Gardens.

Still more thanks go to the state and national Audubon Societies for the generous support they provide. National Audubon's TogetherGreen grant enabled this chapter to develop our highly successful Save Our Shorebirds program, which continues to this day. More recently, Audubon California's financial support and Anna Weinstein's inspiration and guidance helped us initiate our exciting new Black Oystercatcher survey, which promises to blossom into a rewarding project.

continued

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

continued

Our friends at the Bureau of Land Management deserve recognition for their funding of our cormorant surveys and for our new effort to link local birding locations to the internet. We came to their aid during the purchase of the Stornetta property, and they have graciously returned the favor several times over. We do have good friends at the state and national levels.

Finally, I give my heart-felt thanks to two individuals who have contributed so much to the success of this chapter. Toby (who like Cher needs no second name) continues to be a guiding force for this chapter. Whenever there is a conservation matter that needs our attention, Toby speaks up. She is first and foremost a protector of the birds. But more than that, she remains our standard for birding ethics and professionalism. Finally, she is tireless in her support of our outdoor activities. Although she may argue that she has lost a step over the years, I know that whenever we host a field trip, Toby arrives early.

My final round of thanks goes to one who is undoubtedly the most generous member of our chapter – Ron LeValley. Ron is so incredibly selfless with his talents and resources that he rivals Saint Nick. Whether it's the use of his photos, his studio, his knowledge, experience, attention, advice or his time, if you need it, Ron will give it. He has contributed so much to this chapter since arriving in our community that it is hard to imagine MCAS without him.

So this is my short and incomplete list of some of the people who deserve our thanks and appreciation. There are more – many more. And that longer list includes everyone who reads this column. I thank each of you for your continuing support. Your contribution is just as powerful as anything I have written today. So I give you my warmest thanks and fond wishes for a brighter future. Your chapter appreciates your support.

BIRD WALKS AND FIELD TRIP

Tim Bray

Saturday, November 3, Beginners' Bird Walk: 9:00 a.m. at the Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens.

Wednesday, November 21, Midweek Bird Walk: 8:30 a.m. at the Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens. (Note: the starting time is 8:30 from November through March.)

We meet in the parking lot and generally arrive back at the entrance around noon. All are welcome, regardless of experience level. We have binoculars to loan if needed. A walk in the Gardens is always rewarding, and we usually learn something new each time. On October 17, we identified 58 species of birds. Highlights included a pair of Peregrine Falcons which flew low and close over us, while vocalizing.

Saturday, November 10, your chapter will host the annual field trip to view the hawks of the south coast. Meet at 9:00 a.m. at the south end of the Navarro River bridge. We will carpool down the coast, probably as far south at Point Arena, to view wintering raptors and other birds. Due to the distance traveled and the variety of birds to be seen, this trip typically does not return until mid-afternoon. So bring a lunch and a beverage, and expect for a most enjoyable day.

PAM HUNTLEY ON KZYX FM 88.3, 90.7, AND 91.5

SURF SCOTER

One of my first embarrassing moments as a birder was on a field trip, shouting to my professor, "Puffins", which turned out to be Surf Scoters. Both are black ocean birds with orange bills, but there is a big difference in size of bird and bill. These black dots can be seen in large numbers off the coast in winter. They are easily identified by the male's striking white spot on the back of the neck and the forehead, and a white eye. The bill is large and bright orange, black and white. While other ducks go into eclipse coloration for winter, male Surf Scoters keep their bright colors year round.

The females are brown with white spots on the back of the neck and on the cheeks and the same white eyes as adult males. Juveniles have brown eyes. Surf Scoters are aptly named since they feed in the surf zone, diving or scooting through the waves. They dive six to thirty feet using the inner part of their wings and their feet for swimming. They stay down nineteen to thirty-two seconds. Sometimes, an entire flock has been seen diving under water all at once. Their main food is mollusks, such as mussels, clams and periwinkles.

Watching these and other scoters head north in spring is a breath-taking experience. I have watched flock after flock racing northward, low over the water, hour after hour by the thousands, leaving me in awe of the abundance in nature.



Surf Scoter photo by
Ron LeValley
www.LeValleyphoto.com

THANK YOU

Sarah Grimes

On behalf of MCAS, heartfelt gratitude to Out of this World for their ongoing generosity and support of our education program.

For a second year, they have paid for the repair and shipping of damaged binoculars. Even though we emphasize to the hundreds of local kids using our binoculars every year to handle the "binos" with care, a couple need repairing or replacing each year. Out of this World also donated a new bird book for two of our star students who sadly lost their home and everything in it to a fire.





Can you count the Black Turnstones and Surf-birds in this photo taken at Glass Beach in late October? Becky Bowen Photo

WHY SAVE OUR SHOREBIRD COUNTS

SOS volunteers know shorebirds are telling them something. The more they talk, the more we learn. And the more we learn, the more we know.

Thanks to an extraordinary group of volunteers, who will soon finish another year of on-foot surveys at Ten Mile Beach, Virgin Creek Beach and Glass Beach. Since 2007, SOS volunteers logged more than 5,000 hours, most of them in the field tallying birds. We make available at no charge to everybody.

Our sincere thanks to those who helped in 2012: Henri Bensussen, Jim Bogue, Becky and Win Bowen, Alison Cebula, Enrique Delgadillo, Alan Gillespie, Jim Griswold, Karen Havlena, Bill Heil, Richard Hubacek, Adam Hutchins, Trudy Jensen, Stephen Johnson, Angela and Matt Liebenberg, Ron LeValley, Ana Lytle, Charlene McAllister, Art Morley, Linda Perkins, and Dorothy Tobkin. And we thank the MCAS Board of Directors for the cheerful support for six years.

We submit our counts to Cornell University's database. Our liaison to the University writes: "I would like to thank you and your survey crew, again, for all the work you do. You are filling a very large hole in our knowledge of the status and seasonal distribution of birds on our coast."

Black Turnstones in the photo 18, Surf-birds 10. Both Black Turnstones and Surf-birds are on the NAS and American Bird Conservancy watchlist, so the pleasure of seeing all these shorebirds at Glass Beach is doubled.

Save Our Shorebirds is an ongoing long-term citizen science MCAS program in partnership with State Parks and FLOCKworks. To help with surveys, contact State Parks Environmental Scientists Angela Liebenberg at ALIEBENBERG@parks.ca.gov and please visit us at www.facebook.com/SaveOurShorebirds

WILLET

Donald Shephard



Willet in nonbreeding plumage

When we lived in Lodi, my wife and I used to drive east through vineyards and orchards out to the pastures and the foothills, birding all the way. In fall and spring, we sometimes saw Willets beside the similar Lesser Yellowlegs foraging vernal pools for insects. In breeding plumage, both species show a different appearance but, the Lesser Yellowlegs is a much smaller bird. The food garnered from these pools fuels Willets' eight ounce bodies on migration. The Willet has one of the greatest latitudinal ranges of temperate breeding shorebirds in North America – from the Canadian Maritimes to Venezuela – making it the only North American sandpiper with a breeding range

extending south of the North-temperate region.

Whether in mottled brown breeding plumage or gray winter colors, Willets in flight reveal a bold white and black stripe running the length of each wing. These long-legged, straight-billed shorebirds feed along beaches, mudflats, and rocky shores. Willets are common on most of the California coastline. Learn to recognize them and they'll provide a useful reference point for identifying other shorebirds.

Watch for a large, stocky shorebird with long legs and thick, a straight bill considerably longer than the head; wings broader and rounder than those of many shorebirds; and a short tail, squared at the base. Bluish-gray legs help separate them from Lesser Yellowlegs.

Take a walk with a Save Our Shorebirds volunteer and you will often observe a Willet by itself. They walk deliberately, pausing to probe for crabs, worms and other prey in sand and mudflats. They pick at insects, mollusks, crustaceans and marine worms, but also eat plant material. When startled, they react with a piercing call, often opening their wings and running rather than taking flight. In winter, Willets are easy to spot feeding along the water's edge.

As they're one of the largest common shorebirds, even though they're indistinctly marked they are quickly recognize by their overall chunky shape, subdued plumage, and thick, long bill. To be absolutely sure, check their distinctive black-and-white wing markings when they take flight.

In winter, Willets feed on beaches and rocky coasts, as well as mudflats and marshes. During breeding season the western population moves far inland to nest in grasslands and prairies near freshwater. Eastern Willets breed in coastal saltmarshes and on barrier beaches and islands.

The Willet loudly heralds the arrival of spring from aloft with its ringing "*pill-will-willet*" call, accompanied by flashing wing-beats.

WILLET

continued

Willetts breeding in the interior of the West differ from the Atlantic Coastal form in their ecology, shape, and subtly in calls. Western Willetts are slightly larger and paler gray. Eastern Willetts have stouter bills and more barring on their chest and back. Birders find it difficult to detect the difference between the calls of the two subspecies, east and west, but the birds can hear the difference and respond more strongly to recorded calls of their own type. The eastern subspecies of Willet breeds in coastal saltmarshes along the Atlantic, a very different habitat from the grasslands and Great Basin deserts used by the western subspecies.

Willetts take most of their prey from the surface, using their sensitive bill tip to grab up worms, snails, and insects. They also probe for sand crabs and other prey on mudflats and beaches, and take shellfish and small fiddler crabs from rocky shorelines. You'll usually see them on wet sand or wading close to the water's edge, but occasionally Willetts paddle in shallow waters to chase down small fish and crabs. In spring, the *pill-will-willet* call marks the arrival of Willetts on the breeding grounds. Willet pairs often remain together for several years and return to the same nest sites. Males loudly defend their nesting and feeding territories, challenging their neighbors with a ritualized walk along territorial boundaries that can escalate into physical attacks. Although both parents incubate the eggs and teach the young to feed, only the male Willet spends the night on the nest. The female Willet departs the nest site up to two weeks ahead of the male, leaving her mate to finish raising the chicks.

Willetts and other shorebirds were once a popular food. In 1871, John James Audubon wrote that the eggs were tasty and the young "grow rapidly, become fat and juicy, and by the time they are able to fly, afford excellent food." The Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 banned market hunting and marked the start of the Willet's comeback.

If you are in the Central Valley in spring, listen for the onomatopoeic call, *pill-will-willet*, and you will have progressed from a visual birder to an aural identifier able to appreciate Willetts' recovery while it lasts.

Willet photo by Ron LeValley
www.LeValleyphoto.com



WHAT BIRDS HAVE YOU SEEN IN YOUR YARD?

Toby tells me she saw her first new yard bird in about a year. The Western Meadowlark takes her lifetime yard bird count to 121, a respectable total for a mid-town Fort Bragg yard. She suggests we ask members to submit yard list totals including location, and the two or three rarest or most interesting birds. Send your data to the editor: P.O.Box 1031, Mendocino CA 95460 or donshephard@comcast.net

SIGN UP NOW FOR OUR CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNTS

Christmas Bird Count season is approaching fast. MCAS is again sponsoring two counts: the Fort Bragg circle (CAFB) on Saturday December 22, and the Manchester (CAMN) the following Saturday, December 29, 2012.

These are exciting days for birders: their efforts often produce unexpected finds, and the experience of taking part in massive data-collection is always rewarding. Last year's totals included 135 species for the Manchester count, and a remarkable 149 on the Fort Bragg count. We were extremely fortunate to find the first verified Mendocino County record for Baltimore Oriole on the Fort Bragg count last year, a sighting that received a lot of attention. Sometimes the surprises are the birds NOT found - Acorn Woodpecker went unrecorded on the Manchester count last year; meanwhile, three dedicated owlers in the Fort Bragg circle found Barred, Spotted, Saw-whet, and Pygmy Owls, but missed Great-horned, Barn and Western Screech-owls. To participate in this year's counts, contact any of the Area Leaders, or the Compilers:

CAFB - **Tim Bray**, tbray@wildblue.net, or 937-4422

CAMN - **David Jensen**, djensen@mcn.org or 964-8163

LOCAL 4-H BIG OCTOBER

Sarah Grimes

In the spirit of a Big Year, young birders are checking their lists. We held our first class at my home in Little River for the benefit of birding near a feeder. We counted 20 species in no time. Some highlights included good looks at bickering nuthatches., both Red Breasted and Pygmy. At the back of the property is my rescued old snag that some years ago was threatened by a helpful neighbor's chainsaw. Thankfully it remains standing, and offers hours of entertainment. We were discussing the importance of snags to woodpeckers, when someone pointed out a faint tap-tapping from inside the snag. After about five minutes we discovered that it was none other than one of the "jar" of Pygmy Nuthatches who roost there. It was busy excavating. Other species seen or heard that day were Hairy Woodpeckers, Red Crossbills and a "trembling" of Pine Siskins. 2012 marks our second "Big October" with local 4-H young birders.

**Red-breasted Nuthatch (left) Pygmy Nuthatch (right) photos by Ron LeValley,
www.LeValleyphoto.com**



FALL PELAGIC TRIP REPORT

Karen Havlena

Thanks to our trip leaders, Ron LeValley, Jon Dunn and Tony Kurz, who did a great job in educating us about the different bird and mammal species we saw on 7 October, 2012. Captain Randy Thornton took us on the Telstar both southwest and northwest of Noyo harbor exploring the sea surface above the canyon edges. Thanks to Tony Kurz of Arcata for providing the species list and the numbers of those species.

Highlight species:

South Polar Skua and Flesh-footed Shearwater.

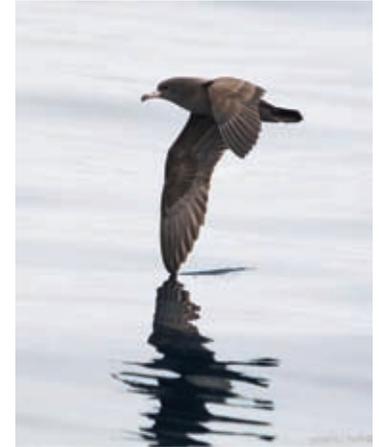
Open ocean seabirds:

Surf Scoter – 25, Common Loon – 2, Eared Grebe – 2, Black-footed Albatross – 17, Northern Fulmar – 17, Pink-footed Shearwater – 201, Flesh-footed Shearwater – 1, Buller's Shearwater – 17, Sooty Shearwater – 27, Red-necked Phalarope – 4, Western Gull – 188, California Gull – 244, Herring Gull – 5, South Polar Skua – 1, Pomarine Jaeger – 5, Common Murre – 48, Pigeon Guillemot – 1, Cassin's Auklet – 125, Rhinoceros Auklet – + 40.



Pacific White-sided Dolphin doing backflips.

Photo by Ron LeValley
www.LeValleyphoto.com



Flesh-footed Shearwater showing why they are called shearwaters. Photo by Ron LeValley

www.LeValleyphoto.com

Noyo Harbor birds:

Brandt's Cormorant- 1, Double-crested Cormorant- 4, Pelagic Cormorant- 3, Black Oystercatcher- 1, Spotted Sandpiper- 1, Black Turnstone- 4, Heerman's Gull- 3, Western Gull- 20.

Marine Mammals:

Humpback Whale, White-sided Dolphin, Northern Right Whale Dolphin, Dall's Porpoise, California Sea Lion, Northern Fur Seal.

Thanks to Bob Keiffer, Sean Thornton, Ryan Keiffer and Geoff Heinecken for helping me to lure the birds with a variety of chum.

MCAS BOARD MEETING

Mendocino Coast Audubon Society

Board of Directors Meeting

November 12 at 6:30 p.m.

44711 Baywood Drive, (Surfwood) Mendocino

Public welcome

BLACK OYSTERCATCHER CONSERVATION THROUGH CITIZEN-SCIENCE

Joleen Ossello

Preliminary results are in for this summer's breeding bird survey of Black Oystercatchers, *Haematopus bachmani*. Forty-one nests were monitored along thirty miles of coast line between MacKerricher State Park and Navarro Point Preserve. Of the thirty-two nests with conclusive data, show that 38% of adult pairs successfully fledged one or two young. 42% of those hatched young did in fact, successfully fledge, meaning they were capable of sustained flight and reached 38-40 days old.

While these percentages may sound low, there are a variety of possible contributing factors. Until further analysis, no conclusions can be drawn as to the status of our current population. Participants observed and reported: large groups of single birds flying together; most of the suitable habitat being utilized by nesting pairs; shared nesting rocks with Western Gulls and Pelagic Cormorants; summer long territorial displays by nesting pairs; actual and potential human disturbances; and public enthusiasm for and fascination with this species.

The project is spearheaded by Audubon California and includes the Mendocino, Sonoma, and Monterey Audubon Chapters, with California State Parks and the Bureau of Land Management's California Coastal National Monument (CCNM) working together to establish initial data on habitat status and fledging success along the California Coastline.

The MCAS chapter coordinator advised participants and state park personnel on guidelines, protocol, and data collection. We conducted weekly summer surveys at select sites of high species density. Data collected by the participants will be analyzed by the USGS Forest and Rangeland Ecosystem Science Center in Corvallis, Oregon. The results will tell us how well Black Oystercatchers are succeeding at reproducing here and relate that information to other areas. The long term goal of the Black Oystercatcher Conservation Project is to provide the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service range-wide working group with information that can be used to create a best practices handbook for the west coast conservation of Black Oystercatchers.

The full preliminary report can be found on the MCAS website at www.mendocinocoastaudubon.org

If you are interested in participating in this study in the future, please contact the MCAS Conservation Chair.

Photo: Black Oystercatcher, *Haematopus bachmani* | Nature Notes www.ontfin.com



Black Oystercatcher photos by
Ron LeValley, www.LeValleyphoto.com

MCAS BOARD MEMBERS AND PROGRAM CHAIRS 2011-2012

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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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FORT BRAGG, CA, 95437

