

# The Whistling Swan



NEWSLETTER OF THE MENDOCINO COAST AUDUBON SOCIETY

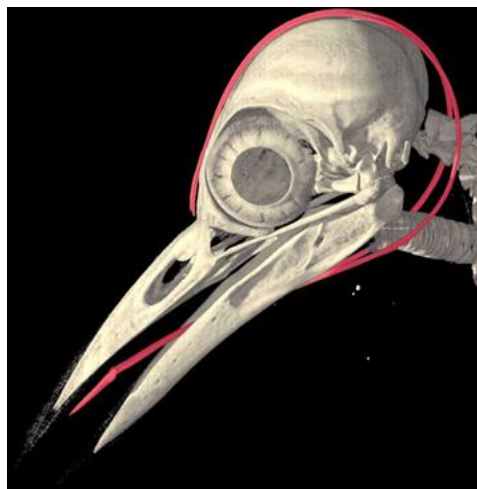
September 2012

**TONGUES, TOES, AND TALES**  
of  
**CALIFORNIA WOODPECKERS**  
**STEPHEN SHUNK**  
**TOWN HALL Main Street, Fort Bragg**  
**SEPTEMBER 17th, at 7:00 p.m.**

Imagine for a moment slamming your face into a brick wall at 16 miles per hour. This self-destructive (and foolish) act would require about 1,200 g of force, almost certainly resulting in your death. Yet, a Pileated Woodpecker exerts the same force up to 20 times per second, and as many as 12,000 times per day, pounding its head into trees. The woodpecker anatomy is perfectly suited for its climbing and excavating lifestyle. Some woodpecker species also possess adaptations for aerial acrobatics, for drilling sap wells, or for extracting ants from underground burrows. And woodpecker adaptation goes well beyond the anatomy. Cavity excavation, drumming, and food storage are just a few examples of their amazing specialization. Join Oregon naturalist, Steve Shunk, for a guided tour of the fascinating woodpecker anatomy along with stories of their dynamic lifestyles.



Photo and graphic  
Courtesy of  
Stephen  
Shunk



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## *Not too Late*

### *To Renew*

*MCAS membership renewal started July 1 for 2012-2013*

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**PRESIDENT'S CORNER****David Jensen**

Welcome back, everyone, for what promises to be another memorable season of program, bird walks, field trips, conservation efforts and educational opportunities. Since this is my first column in a few months, I will start by reviewing some of our accomplishments from the past summer with an eye to what is ahead.

Working together with Audubon California, board member and professional biologist Joleen Ossello organized a very successful effort to monitor the reproductive success of Black Oystercatchers along our coast. Building on the knowledge gained during last year's initial survey of breeding sites, teams of volunteers studied known breeding areas along the coast. We watched for territorial behavior of adult pairs in late spring, mapped the location of individual nests,

waited patiently to determine whether the eggs successfully hatched, and then watched expectantly to see whether the young would survive until they could fly.

It was sobering to see how few nests were successful, but it was so thrilling to see the freshly hatched young birds clamber among the rocks they so closely resemble, and then to take some pride in the few smudgy-billed youngsters who had survived to join a gang in the mussel beds.

This summer we also continued our breeding surveys of Pelagic Cormorants, Brandt's Cormorants, and Common Murres. This proved to be a very tough year for our near-shore species: The number of successful nests were less than in previous years. We gathered important data that, when combined with the observations from colonies in other coastal regions and supplemented with hydrological and other biological data, will help further our understanding of the dynamics that shape seabird populations.

As it says in *The Book* – many are called, but few are chosen. Whether it's Oystercatchers, Cormorants, Murres, Brown Pelicans, Snowy Plovers, California Quail or Mourning Doves, our formal surveys and casual observations all clearly point to the fact that despite the romance of flight, it is very hard to grow up being a bird. It's hard to survive and getting harder.

So in the coming year, we at Mendocino Coast Audubon will rededicate ourselves to do what we can to help make a difference. We will keep the passion for birds alive in our members and expand that interest in the community by offering educational and enjoyable programs and field trips. We will help our neighbors realize what we all have learned: It is fun to watch the birds, even more fun when you know their names and understand how they live. We will continue to raise the next generation of birders through our educational programs in local schools. We will help young people realize it is fun to be outdoors and be a part of nature. We will do what we can to protect those species that are struggling to survive along our coast. We help decision-makers at all levels learn that birds matter. So welcome back for another year with Mendocino Coast Audubon.

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

### SHARP-SHINNED HAWK

The Sharp-shinned Hawk is built for amazingly fast and agile flight in dense forests. These woodland hawks belong to the accipiter genus, whose members have short, rounded wings and long squared-off narrow tails that are used like rudders, allowing them to maneuver through trees and foliage.

Sharp-shinned Hawks are the smallest accipiter. The males are about a foot long. As with most hawks the females are almost a third larger. Both sexes look alike: They have a gray-blue back and fine red bars across the chest and belly. The eye of the adult is scarlet. Immature sharp-shins have yellow eyes and are brown with brown streaking on the breast. They characteristically fly with alternating flaps and glides.

Sharp-shinned Hawks are a common migrant or winter visitor, but are uncommon breeders or year-round residents.

They eat small birds and are masters of the high-speed chase. They are often seen stalking a backyard feeder for their prey. They take more birds than any other accipiter and rarely go for small mammals, lizards or insects.

Sharpies generally build a new two-foot wide nest each year out of sticks and twigs. Occasionally, they will rebuild an old crow or squirrel nest. The female incubates four to five white eggs marked with brown for a month; the male feeds her for this entire time.

Sharp-shinned Hawks are generally silent except for alarm calls given if intruders come close to the nest. Other names include chicken hawk, sparrow hawk, bullet hawk and little blue darter.



Photo courtesy  
of Berlchard

## SAVE OUR SHOREBIRDS: THE BIGGER PICTURE Becky Bowen

Just when you think you've seen it all, up pops a surprise and another deposit to the memory bank of treasures. Take the last few weeks, for example. SOS surveyors reported:

- A gentle Northern fur seal who slithered up on the dry sand near Ten Mile's Fen Creek to molt during a two-week sand bath in July. We called her "Sweet Verbena" because of the native plant patch she chose for her daily bask.
- A banded Black Turnstone which turned up in the background of a photo taken of a dowitcher on Ten Mile Beach July 23 (for the first five years of SOS, we counted 5,852 Black Turnstones, and not one of them was banded).
- Twenty-six cat-calling Caspian Terns lined up at the wateredge Aug. 20, waiting for clearance to take off in dense fog on Ten Mile Beach.
- A river otter in the surf halfway between Ten Mile River and Ward Avenue, June 30.
- Two Wandering Tattlers together on a Glass Beach bluff rock, Aug. 14, and again on Aug. 24.
- A squadron of Ten Mile Bridge Cliff Swallows in hot aerial pursuit of a Red-shouldered Hawk, Aug. 8.
- A Pacific Golden-Plover and a Ruddy Turnstone strolling down Ten Mile Beach together, Aug. 18.



The first SOS survey June 15, 2007 Ten Mile Beach



"Sweet Verbena"



Caspian Terns cleared for takeoff August, 20

- A dozen Red-necked Phalaropes frolicking in the Ward Avenue surf under the watchful eye of a harbor seal that floated nearby, Aug. 10.
- A Barn Owl placidly perched on a stump on the banks of Ten Mile River, Aug. 25.

We always knew it was about more than counting shorebirds and we are trained to look at everything we see on SOS hikes. It seems the surprises, like the shorebirds, keep coming during this magical fall migration.

*Save Our Shorebirds is an MCAS on-going long term citizen science project in partnership with State Parks. For the past six years, SOS volunteer surveyors have gathered shorebird data on three MacKerricher State Parks beaches. Data are recorded, submitted to Cornell University's international bird database, and made available to everyone. To help, contact Angela Liebenberg, State Parks Environmental Scientist [ALIEBENBERG@parks.ca.gov](mailto:ALIEBENBERG@parks.ca.gov)*

## FALL CALENDAR BIRD WALKS FIELD TRIPS

The Mendocino Coast Audubon Society conducts two bird walks a month at the Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens. We hold a monthly beginner's bird walk on the first Saturday of the month, and a midweek walk on the third Wednesday. Each month we hold at least one field trip, which is held on the second weekend of the month. Special field trips are occasionally held. 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. Binoculars will be available.

The September field trip will focus on the birds of Virgin Creek. Participants should meet at 8 a.m. in the CalTrans turnout just north of the Pudding Creek bridge on Highway 1 at the north end of Fort Bragg. We will survey birds in Pudding Creek Lagoon then proceed to Virgin Creek Beach. This is an exciting time of year to look for shorebirds. The field trip should end by noon.

- Sat., Sept. 1** Beginners' Bird Walk: 9 a.m., Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens  
Admission free to Gardens members
- Sat., Sept. 8** Field trip to Virgin Creek: 8 a.m. (see instructions above)
- Sat. Sept. 15** California Coastal Beach Cleanup Day on Ten Mile Beach: 9 a.m.  
Meet in parking area at the south end of Ten Mile River
- Mon., Sept. 17** MCAS Program Presentation: 7 p.m., Town Hall, Fort Bragg (corner of Main and Laurel) "California Woodpeckers" (see p. 1)
- Wed., Sept. 19** Bird Walk: 8 a.m., Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens  
Admission free to Gardens members
- Sat., Oct. 6** Beginners' Bird Walk: 9 a.m., Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens.  
Admission free to Gardens members
- Sun., Oct. 14** Field trip to Glass Beach: 8 a.m., meet at the west end of Elm Street in Fort Bragg (from Main Street, turn west on Elm Street at the Denny's restaurant)

## CENTRAL VALLEY BIRD SYMPOSIUM Linda Pittman



The Central Valley Bird Club will host the 16th Annual Central Valley Birding Symposium (CVBS) November 15-18, 2012 at the Stockton Hilton Hotel, Stockton, CA.

Thursday night – Ed Harper presents "Appreciating the Birds of the Central Valley"

Friday night – Sophie Webb speaks on "Birds & Marine Mammals of the Tropical Eastern Pacific"

Saturday night – Carlos Bethancourt presents "The Natural Splendor of Panamá," and

Paul J. Baicich presents "Access Matters: Why Birders Should Care"

Other events include "A Century of Field Identification," by Joe Morlan, bird ID workshop by Jon Dunn and sketching workshop by Sophie Webb.

Our field trips always turn up exciting birds. Add in the always entertaining and educational Bird ID Panel and the Birder's Market.

There's something for everyone interested in birds. Come and join us to bird, learn and have fun.

Check [www.cvbs.org](http://www.cvbs.org) for more details.

**MARBLED GODWIT****Donald Shephard****Marbled Godwit photo Alan D. Wilson**

My wife and I vacationed in Costa Rica this year and some Marbled Godwits do the same. The prairie breeding and short migrations of most Marbled Godwits contrast greatly with the long Arctic to southern South America migration of Hudsonian Godwits. Most Marbled Godwits winter in coastal California or Mexico, and some range as far as South America.

Becky Bowen has a fond memory of a Marbled Godwit literally "escorting" a Hudsonian Godwit down the water's edge at Ten Mile Beach near the Ward Avenue

ramp. The date is seared in her memory: August 30, 2009. The next day she went to Ten Mile Beach on an SOS survey and found the same two together about half a mile north of the previous day's sighting. They foraged shoulder to shoulder. She sat down in the sand with the camera and after a while, they came nearer and nearer until they were about five feet away. They seemed to be perfect companions.

Save Our Shorebirds volunteers walking Ten Mile Beach may first spot a flock with Whimbrels and Long-billed Curlews, both large and brown like the Marbled Godwit. "Marbled" refers to the extensive speckled pattern of black and beige across the godwit's upper parts. "Godwit" refers to one of their calls. Walk with our friendly volunteers and they will point out a pale orange patch in the upper wing and a clean cinnamon under-wing, distinctive in flight. They will also guide you to the long, slightly upcurved bill with an orange tone from the base to about half its length, and then dark to the tip. No survey by an SOS member lacks interest. You may be surprised to see Marbled Godwits, like their rarer cousins, Hudsonian Godwits, sometimes foraging almost exclusively on plants during migration. So search among the bull kelp along the shore. In preparation for fall migration, this sandpiper gorges on algae and sago pond weed tubers, which constitute up to 86% of its diet by volume.

Never far from water during migration and on its wintering grounds, this godwit inhabits mud and sand flats, shallow tidal waters, and freshwater marshes. A Marbled Godwit moves slowly, probing for food under the mud with its sensitive bill, often inserting the entire bill into the mud, and completely submerging its head. They eat mollusks, crustaceans, and other aquatic creatures that live in the sand and mud. They consume clams, snails, crabs, and marine worms—especially bristle worms—by probing deeply or picking insects from surfaces.

They migrate in loose flocks that often rearrange their lines. Juveniles set out a few weeks later than adults. Marbled Godwits migrate south through this area from July through April and return through April and early May, and some stay in this area throughout this period. Females often depart the breeding grounds before males and juveniles.

## MARBLED GODWIT

continued

They breed on the prairies of western Canada and the north central Great Plains, near marshes or ponds. They usually nest in short grass in wet meadows or near water, preferring shallow seasonal pools or ponds. Should you vacation on a prairie, you would be extremely lucky to find a Marbled Godwit nest for they are not easily found. These birds do not readily flush from their eggs. Incubating adults can sometimes be picked up from the nest. Both parents share in incubation and brood care.

Monogamous pairs appear to reunite before entering the breeding grounds. Breeding territories are large – up to 220 acres. Courtship includes high aerial displays by the male, joint flights, and ceremonial scraping. The male selects a site and digs several scrapes, which the female inspects.

The female lays 3-5 pale yellow to olive eggs marked with small patches and lines of brown or purple. In 23-26 days, chicks emerge fully feathered and precocial. The young leave the nest soon after hatching and find their own food. Both parents protect and tend the young for the first 15 to 26 days, after which the female usually leaves. The male stays with the young until they can fly. Marbled Godwits defend their young vigorously from potential threats of all sizes: from ravens and cranes to foxes and bears.

Despite natural predation, the Canadian Wildlife Service estimates the population at 171,500 birds. Common in the 1800s, they were over-hunted in the early 1900's. Protection from hunting has helped the population rebound, but the destruction of grassland breeding habitat now limits the population. According to National Audubon, the San Francisco Bay area, where an estimated 10% of all Marbled Godwits stop in spring, has lost 85% of its tidal marshes.

Numbers appear to have increased slightly in some regions since the early twentieth century, when hunting of this species was banned. Probably because large portions of its former breeding habitats are now cropland, it has not increased in numbers to repopulate its former breeding range.

Godwits are collectively known as an "omniscience", "pantheon", or "prayer" of godwits. Next time you stroll along the beach or wander by a mudflat, you have a prayer of a chance to see this largest of the four godwits, but if you vacation on the prairie in breeding season you need to be omniscient to find one of their nests.

Marbled  
Godwit  
photo  
courtesy  
of  
Badjoby



## MCAS BOARD MEMBERS AND PROGRAM CHAIRS 2012-2013

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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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