

The Whistling Swan



NEWSLETTER OF THE MENDOCINO COAST AUDUBON SOCIETY

December 2011

FORT BRAGG CHRISTMAS COUNT PREVIEW

Ron LeValley

December 19th

7 pm Fort Bragg Town Hall



American Goldfinch photo
Ron LeValley
www.LeValleyphoto.com

December's special program is a review of the birds that spend the winter along the Mendocino coast. Ron LeValley will share photos of local wintering species. He will take time to compare and contrast similar birds that may be difficult to differentiate, such as House Finch and Purple Finch.

This program will also be an introduction to the first official Fort Bragg Christmas Bird Count.

We will discuss what a Christmas Count is, how it works, what we learn, and how you can be an important participant, regardless of your identification skills. The count is a wonderful opportunity for beginning or intermediate bird watchers to go out with more experienced birders and learn to identify birds. We will also explain how you can participate from the comfort of your home by reporting feeder birds.

Christmas Bird Counts have been an Audubon tradition since 1900. Join us in celebrating the end of the year and the start of a new count circle in the Fort Bragg area. Holiday refreshments will be available. Feel free to bring some to share.

Pine Siskin photo

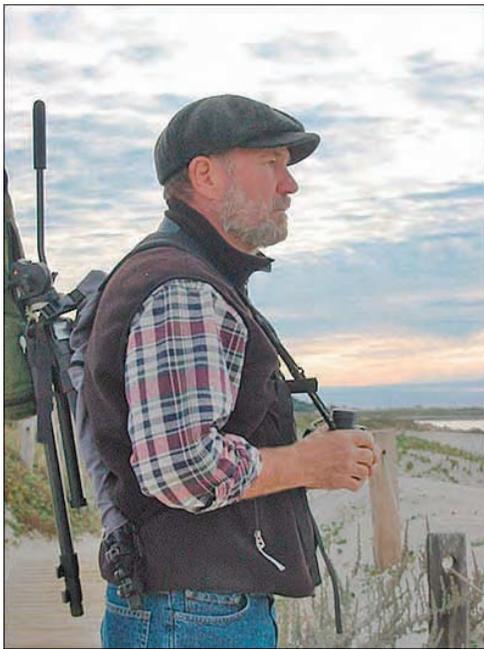
Ron LeValley

www.LeValleyphoto.com



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PRESIDENT'S CORNER**David Jensen**

As you read through this edition of the Whistling Swan, you will learn that your chapter is hosting two Christmas Bird Counts this year. The details of when, where, who, and how are clearly spelled out. I want to explore the more interesting question: why?

Adventure. Like all bird walks, a Christmas count is a treasure hunt. On a good day you find something special; on a bad day you have a great time. Some of my best birding memories are from count days: ducks and geese in the afternoon sun on Suisun Bay, woodpeckers in the snow on Mount Hamilton, owls calling in the dark, a Bobcat hunting ground squirrels in Manchester, a stormy afternoon when the Garcia River kept rising over the highway while we watched. How well do you remember what you did last Saturday? If you join us on either count, I promise it will be a memorable day.

Exercise. If you want to burn some holiday calories, grab your hat and coat and join us. Although

most territories are surveyed via short walks from multiple starting points, both local counts have territories that involve longer hikes. Those of us with limited mobility can join a team that counts from a vehicle. If you are unable to leave your house, you can still participate by keeping a feeder list. Just count the birds in your backyard and give the results to Joleen Ossello at j_ossello@earthlink.net or 962-0142.

Education. You do not need to be a master birder to join the counts. Everyone has a chance to be a productive team member. Each team will have at least one experienced birder, who can identify the difficult species. If you are a beginning birder, you may want to count in the territory that includes your home or your favorite local birding spot in order to become more familiar with the species you regularly see. If you are an experienced birder, you already know that you still have a lot to learn by being in the field. If you want a refresher, come to our special pre-count program at Town Hall on December 19th at 7 pm.

Fellowship. Christmas counts are social events. There is a strong feeling of camaraderie during a count day from the time you get out of the car, sip on a hot cup of coffee, and meet your teammates in the dim light of a winter morning, until the end of the compilation dinner when the last rare bird sighting is revealed. You sense that you are sharing a special experience not only with the persons on your team, but also with the others in your count circle and beyond. On that day, in the same hour, there are thousands of like-minded folk walking through woods and grasslands and city parks looking for birds and tabulating what they find. We may not total 99%, but we count. So come be part of us.

Meaningful Contribution. Participating in a Christmas Bird Count truly contributes meaningfully to our knowledge of the natural world. Professional scientists and environmental policy makers recognize the value of Audubon's database of annual CBC

continued

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

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Observations collected over a span of decades. As one example, the Manchester Count results document how the number of Whistling Swans in the Garcia River valley has decreased dramatically since 1977. On a larger scale, CBC results clearly show the gradual but undeniable effects of climate change on populations of wintering birds across the continent.

So the Christmas counts are more than just another bird walk. Each one provides a unique opportunity to get outside, get active, learn, make friends, contribute to the common good, and mostly to have fun. So come join us.

PAM HUNTLEY ON KZYX FM 88.3, 90.7, AND 91.5

The Peregrine Falcon is the namesake for the inland Audubon group. David Allen Sibley calls this bird the embodiment of speed and power. I have been awestruck when seeing one speeding over the bluffs on bent wings.

Adults are recognized by their blue-gray back, barred lower chest and unique dark hood or helmet with a dark line coming down below the eye. They are year-round residents on the coast and in mountainous areas inland. Almost any child will tell you with authority that they are the fastest flyers. This refers to their spectacular dives on prey, usually medium-sized birds, which falconers call stooping. One Peregrine passed an airplane at one hundred and seventy-five miles per hour. They have been known to exceed two hundred miles per hour, but probably typically fly nearer one hundred miles per hour. They plunge from great height with bent wings; then with talons outstretched strike their target causing an explosion of feathers. The prey is usually retrieved on the ground but sometimes the falcon will stoop again and catch the tumbling bird in the air.

Their speed was of no help against the pesticide DDT from the 1940's to 1970's when breeding pairs in California plummeted from over 200 to only two pairs. Thankfully, the banning of the pesticide and a successful captive breeding program have steadily increased their numbers. Now they can be found nesting on window ledges in cities on both coasts, eating a steady diet of pigeons, and giving us inspiration and hope for all our endangered species.



Peregrine Falcon photo Ron LeValley
www.LeValleyphoto.com

CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNTS

This year the Mendocino Coast Audubon Society will sponsor two Christmas Bird Counts. The first will be held on Friday, December 30th, in the Manchester area. It will be followed by a free compilation dinner in Point Arena. Contact Dave Jensen at [964-8163](tel:964-8163) or djensen@mcn.org for more information. The second count will be held in the Fort Bragg and Mendocino area on Monday, January 2nd. This count will be followed by a compilation dinner in Fort Bragg at a location to be announced. Please contact Tim Bray at [937-4422](tel:937-4422) or tbray@wildblue.net, for more information. We also seek the help of persons interested in counting birds that visit their feeders or backyards for the Fort Bragg Bird Count. Anyone wishing to be a feeder-watcher should contact Joleen Ossello at j_ossello@earthlink.net or [962-0142](tel:962-0142).

BIRD WALKS

December 10th, Saturday. Fort Bragg Christmas Bird Count preview. Meet at CV Starr Parking lot (Lincoln and Maple Streets) in Fort Bragg at 9:00 am.

December 11th, Sunday. Field Trip to Point Arena and Manchester. Meet at Highway One and Miner Hole Road, between Manchester and Point Arena (mile marker 17.54) at 9:00 am.

December 21th, Wednesday. Bird Walk: 8:30 am at Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens. Admission is free to Gardens members.

January 1st, Sunday. State Parks New Year's Day Walks. MAPA will sponsor walks at the various locations. MCAS president David Jensen will lead a walk at Russian Gulch State Park. Participants should meet at the park entrance at 12 noon.

January 7th, Saturday. Beginners' Bird Walk: 9:00 am at Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens. Admission is free to Gardens members.

January 14th, Saturday. Field Trip: 9:00 am, Ten Mile River and Beach. Meet at south end of Ten Mile Bridge on Highway One north of Fort Bragg.

GULL IDENTIFICATION WORKSHOP

Do you want to know more about gulls? On Sunday, **January 15th**, Ron LeValley will present a gull identification (and perhaps appreciation) workshop for the Mendocino Coast Audubon Society. This all-day workshop will be held at the Mendocino Coast Photography Gallery in downtown Fort Bragg. During the morning session, we will thoroughly review of the species that occur (or might occur) in Mendocino County, with special attention to immature plumages. Ron will use his photographs to illustrate identification marks. Weather permitting, we will go in the field in the afternoon. The cost will be \$40. The workshop will be limited to 16 people. If you are interested, please contact Ron LeValley at ron@madriverbio.com or [937-1742](tel:937-1742).

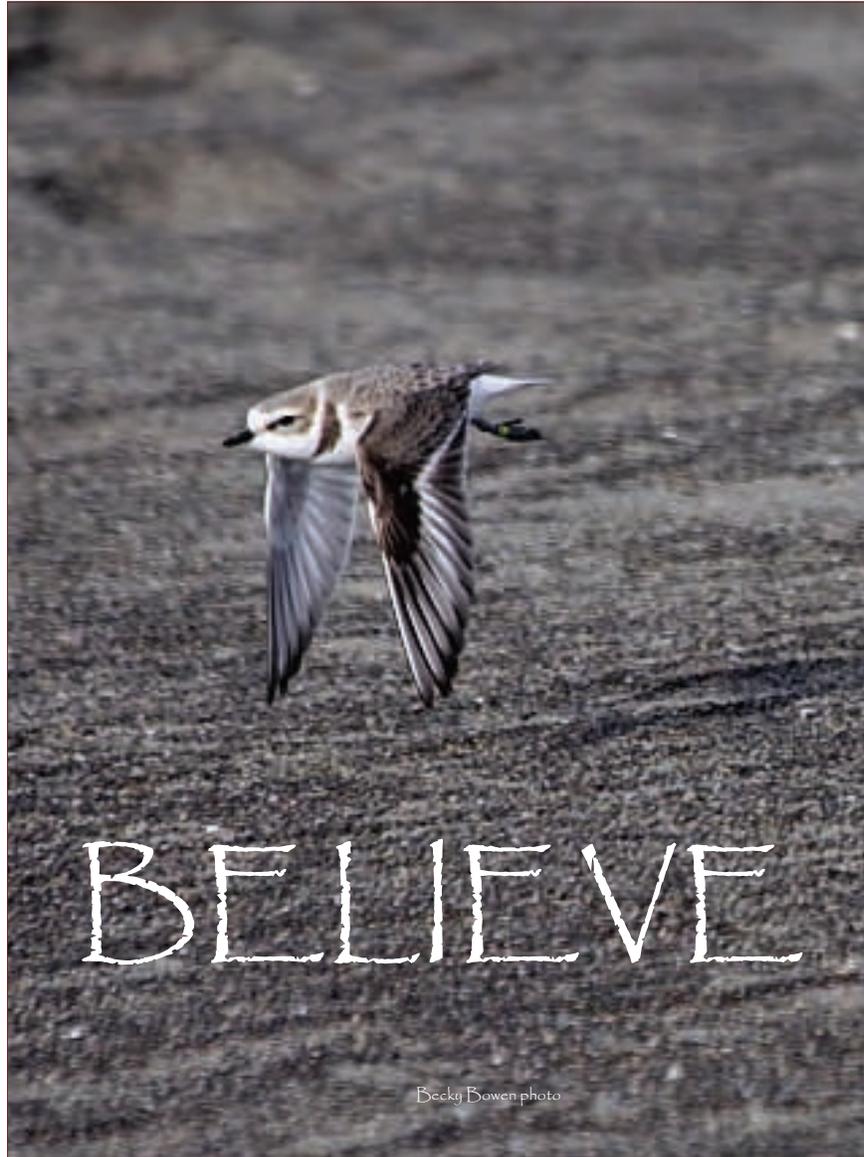
Herring Gull photo Ron LeValley
www.LeValleyphoto.com



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This Western Snowy Plover has been returning to Ten Mile Beach in Mendocino County every winter for three years. It was banded in 2009 at New River, Coos County, Oregon. Where do Western Snowy Plovers go to nest and raise chicks? How do they make their way back to Ten Mile Beach every winter after a long absence?

With extensive habitat restoration by California State Parks and under the eager eyes of Mendocino Coast Audubon Society's Save Our Shorebirds surveyors, we watch—and wonder. And we hope our work at Ten Mile brings the beach back as a nesting site for this tiny bird classified as threatened on the Endangered Species List. Snowy Plovers historically nested on Ten Mile and Virgin Creek Beaches. The last known nest here was in MacKerricher Stat Park in 2005.

Best wishes for a joyous holiday season from Save Our Shorebirds, an ongoing citizen science research project of the Mendocino Coast Audubon Society, in partnership with California State Parks

SEMI-PALMATED PLOVER Donald Shephard

Non-breeding Semi-palmated Plover
photo John Sunan

Stroll Ten Mile Beach in August or September and you will likely run into Becky Bowen studying a Semi-palmated Plover, so called because it has the toes joined only part way down with a web. Becky thinks of them as round birds: round bodies, round heads, round eyes. No wonder she calls them round. These birds are often exceedingly fat in autumn. In 1905, at a time when Ringnecks, as they were then known, were shot for game, C.W. Townsend wrote: "The fat is under the skin, develops all the viscera, and infiltrates the liver. How birds fly so vigorously on their long migrations is a mystery." Their diet consists of worms,

small mollusks, crustaceans and insects. They are on their migration from breeding grounds in the Arctic to feeding places in Central and South America.

Semi-palmated Plovers especially like the mudflats on the south shore of Ten Mile River. A beginner will be forgiven for first thinking Killdeer before noticing this species has a single ring around its neck while the Killdeer has two. More experienced birders note the absence of rufous color on the rump.

This is the darkest of the small plovers. Note the dark brown upper side, white belly and breast, dark cheek, and orange legs, stout orange bill with dark tip. In flight they show a faint white line on the wings which contrasts with the general brown of the upper parts. They keep to themselves in flight, but readily join other species on the ground. You will find Semi-palmated Plovers in association with Least and Western Sandpipers, but also flying with Sanderlings and other larger waders.

Semi-palmated Plovers give the impression of slowly migrating south along a moveable feast in fall, but hurrying to the breeding grounds in spring. Once there, the song is generally given from the ground. It has been likened to a whinny or the sound of a bouncing ball. Notes are at first slowly repeated but their speed increases until nearly running together. Calling birds crouch low with tails spread and slightly cocked, wings partly open and feathers of breast and flanks puffed out. Sometimes one walks around another, sometimes they spring at each other, sometimes they walk side by side in a cakewalk uttering their clucking song. They often emit a plaintive whistle of two notes while in flight, or a single note from the ground.

In 1840 Audubon wrote that in Labrador this plover makes, "a cavity in the moss, in a place sheltered from north winds and exposed to the full rays of the sun, usually by small ponds and surrounded by short grass." Bare pectoral patches suggest both sexes assist in incubation.

SEMI-PALMATED PLOVER

continued

Three or four eggs produce precocial young, capable of running or even swimming short distances to follow parents to small islets on shallow lakes. They also lie flat on the sand, well camouflaged.

Go with Becky at high tide and you may catch this bird asleep on the upper beach beyond the reach of waves. Or you may see them in compact flocks flying, twisting and turning as if animated by a single thought. They also fly in loose order. On alighting they at once spread out on the sand in true plover fashion, and do not, like sandpipers, keep together and move close to the wave line. Another plover habit, which at once distinguishes them from sanderlings and other small sandpipers, is that of running about with heads up and then dabbling suddenly at the ground from time to time, whereas sandpipers usually move with their heads down, diligently probing the sand. With erect figures they run in various directions, often standing still as if listening, occasionally jerking or bobbing their heads and necks and then swiftly dabbling at a morsel of food.

Adults have a partial prenuptial molt involving the body plumage, some scapulars and wing coverts, and a complete postnuptial molt from July to December. The sexes look alike in immature and winter plumage and look nearly in breeding plumage. In winter, in both sexes, the black markings are replaced by grayish-brown. Their plumage matches wet sand, their favorite feeding habitat.

If this description leaves you scratching your head, you are not alone. Becky tells me that in September, 2010, (Save Our Shorebirds (SOS) volunteers posted a photo on the Cowlick's bulletin board and identified it as a Semi-palmated Plover at Virgin Creek Beach. SOS volunteers like to post photos of "What's On Our Beaches" in the ice cream parlor). This triggered a bunch of phone calls from birders who complained that the bird in the photo was misidentified. Whether it was the light, or the angle, or the ongoing molt, we may never know, but birders swore it was not a Semi-palmated Plover. But that's exactly what it was.

Fortunately, there will be many more chances to observe Semi-palmated Plovers. They are among the few plovers whose numbers are apparently increasing, perhaps owing to their versatility in food and habitat choice, their wide-spread coastal winter distribution, or the expansion of suitable expansion in the sub-Arctic as a result of disturbance by both humans and Arctic geese.

Semi-palmated Plover in flight photo Becky Bowen



MCAS FIRST-EVER BIG OCTOBER**Sarah Grimes****Big October participants photo Julie Yager****Western Grebe**

photo by Ron LeValley,
www.LeValleyphoto.com

Pudding Creek provided a perfect venue for learning about our local birds and connecting our young folks with the joy of birding. Sarah Grimes of our education team leads a five-Saturday birding class for the Mendocino 4H Spartans. Ages 9-14.

The objective for our young birders was to check off as many birds as they could in the month of October. The winner was Jillian Anton of Elk with a total of 77. All were winners, hands down, as they learned to identify many of our local birds while having fun and getting outside for five Saturdays of perfect October weather.

The class met at a different birding spot each Saturday and explored many different habitats. Unavoidable were parking lots, where we renamed European Starlings and Brewer's Blackbirds. They are now known as "Parking Lot Birds". Few birds could elude the sharp eyes and ears of this group. Some highlights were the long "Vs" of White-Fronted Geese, a rather cheeky little

American Kestrel harassing some Western Meadowlarks, and for 14 year-old Rowin Breaux, adding a Great Horned owl to his list.

Of course running into Toby, on not one, but two of our walks was a delight and a highlight as she shared her knowledge with the younger generation and helped to pick out the Green-Winged Teals, Ring-Billed Ducks, and the Northern Pintails from "All those Ducks".

Thank you Toby.

Laysan Albatross

Al, the Laysan Albatross, that has returned to Point Arena Cove every year since 1994, has reappeared. We do not know the gender of this bird, we do not know why it flies here instead of following other members of its species to Hawaii for the winter. If Ron LeValley obtains a feather from Al we will get an answer to the first question.

Laysan Albatross photo Don Shephard



112th ANNUAL AUDUBON CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

Tim Bray and Joleen Ossello



© Ron LeValley

Double-crested Cormorants photo Ron LeValley, www.LeValleyphoto.com

Thousands of Californians will participate in the world's longest-running wildlife census this holiday season, and whether you watch your bird feeder or spend a full day in the field with friends, it is a great way to have fun and gather important information on bird populations.

Join other citizen-scientists on Monday, January 2, 2012

Become part of the first official year of the Fort Bragg Christmas Bird Count. Help build our core of community members that seek to engage with their wildlife surroundings. On this one day, birders of all experience levels will form groups to identify and count our local bird species within a 15-mile diameter circle around Fort Bragg, CA.

The Christmas Bird Counts began more than a century ago – as an alternative to holiday hunting contests – when conservationists banded together to identify, count and record all the birds they saw. One of the first counts was held in California in 1900, in Pacific Grove.

As a citizen-scientist, you become a spokesperson for the birds you watch. Contributions to the CBC database and other Citizen Science programs have added to our understanding of the distribution and status of bird populations across North America. The information from this count will be compiled with others from around the nation and beyond, and will ultimately help track the progress of imperiled species and gauge the impact of environmental threats to birds and habitat.

Whether you'd like to join fellow enthusiasts, search for life-list birds, or gaze out your window at the birdfeeder in solitude, your local Audubon chapter invites you to become involved.

To learn more about the Christmas Bird Count, contact Tim Bray by December 30th at **937-4422** or tbray@wildblue.net.

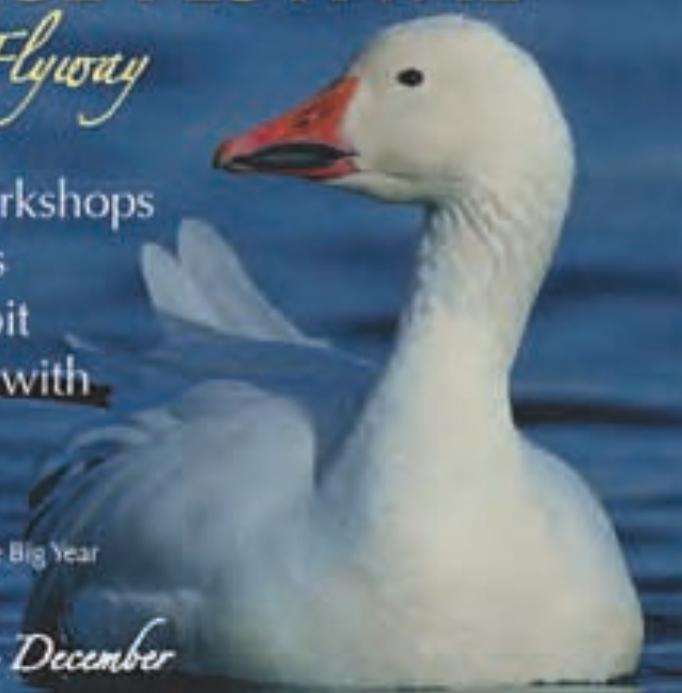
Information is also available at www.mendocinocoastaudubon.org.

Please note that last month I gave incorrect phone numbers, Tim Bray's number is 937-4422 (Ed)

13th Annual
SNOW GOOSE FESTIVAL
of the Pacific Flyway

- Over 65 fieldtrips & workshops
- Fun, FREE kids activities
- Pacific Flyway Art Exhibit
- Saturday night banquet with
KEYNOTE SPEAKER
GREG MILLER
 Famed birder portrayed by Jack Black in The Big Year

Online registration begins in December
January 26-29, 2012 • Chico, CA
 info@snowgoosefestival.org • snowgoosefestival.org • (530)345-1865
Photos by Mike Peters



SAN DIEGO BIRD FESTIVAL

The 16th annual San Diego Bird Festival takes wing on scenic Mission Bay March 1-4, 2012, with Kenn Kaufman as keynoter and Richard Crossley as a special guest. Festival HQ is just steps from San Diego's famous "Mile of Birds" river estuary. Events include field trips, pelagic trips, workshops, the Birding & Optics Expo, a Big Sit, and special Family Free Day bird and art events on Sunday, March 4. For more information visit www.sandiegoaudubon.org, email birdfest@cox.net or call 858-273-7800 to receive a free brochure.



MCAS BOARD MEMBERS AND PROGRAM CHAIRS 2011-2012

President	David Jensen	964-8163	djensen@mcn.org
Vice President	Tony Eppstein	937-1715	tonyepp@mcn.org
Secretary	Becky Bowen	962-1602	casparbeck@comcast.net
Treasurer	Judy Steele	937-2216	judys@mcn.org
SOS Program	Angela Liebenberg	962-9267	aliebenberg@parks.ca.gov
Membership	Charlene McAllister	937-4463	charmac@mcn.org
Programs	Adam Hutchins	962-9055	raptorous@mac.com
Conservation	Joleen Ossello	391-7019	j_ossello@earthlink.net
Historian	Ginny Wade	964-6263	wwade@mcn.org
Newsletter	Donald Shephard	962-0223	donshephard@comcast.net

Off-board chair:

Education	Sarah Grimes	937-4322	zewa@mcn.org
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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

P.O. BOX 2297

FORT BRAGG, CA, 95437

