

the Quail

Mount Diablo Audubon Society

P.O. Box 53, Walnut Creek, CA 94597-0053

www.diabloaudubon.com/index/php

Volume 53, Number 7

April 2008

Why Birds Sing • Denise Wight

On April 3 Denise Wight will present the why and how of birdsong and of the many other vocalizations made by birds. She will discuss the Dawn Chorus and how vocalizations are affected by the environment and habitat. Lastly, she will share resources for learning more about birdsong.

While listening to the cacophony of birdsong on a fresh, spring morning, have you ever asked yourself, "Why do birds sing?" The simple answer is that a male sings to attract and keep a mate, and to defend his territory. But, it is much more complicated than that. We may never know the real reason why birds sing, or what each song is intended to communicate. Scientists have made many fascinating discoveries by observing behavioral clues provided by the singer and by the birds that hear and respond to his song. We have only recently begun to understand how birds sing, but here too, is an area of study where numerous questions are awaiting answers. Understanding some of the 'whys' and 'hows' of birdsong can bring a sense of appreciation and simple joy as we listen to the diverse bird vocalizations around us.

Denise grew up exploring the hills and creeks of Orinda and began birding seriously in her early 30s. Since 1993, she has taught birding classes throughout the East Bay and is currently teaching Birding by Ear at Albany Adult School and Wild Birds Unlimited. She has taught birding classes at the Orinda Community Center and Lindsay Museum and she has led bird walks for both Mount Diablo Audubon and Golden Gate Audubon. She often acts as co-leader for Shearwater Journeys which specializes in birding trips on the open ocean. She has recorded bird sounds in

the Yuba Pass area, the Sierra Nevada, and the Bay Area, as well as in Eastern Australia. Her recent job in downtown San Francisco made birding by ear a challenge but alerted her to many interesting species.

Did you know that in the East Bay we can hear the song of a bird that the miners in the 1890s in Alaska considered a bad omen because the plaintive three note song sounded like the bird was saying 'No gold here'?

You may be familiar with the rattle call and the loud raucous sounds of the common Steller's Jay, but did you know that they also imitate Red-tailed Hawks and other raptors? They also sing a sweet, complex 'whisper' song that can only be heard at close range.

Did you know that the Lesser Goldfinch, seen year round in the East Bay,
Continued on Page 2 »

Meeting Schedule

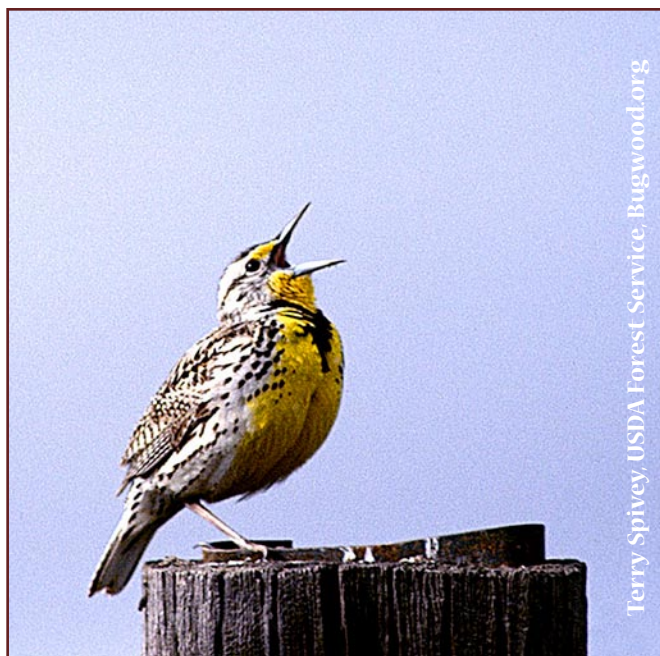
The next general meeting of Mount Diablo Audubon Society will be **Thursday, April 3**, in the Camellia Room of The Gardens at Heather Farm, Walnut Creek.

7:00 PM Birding Information
7:25 PM Announcements
7:40 PM Refreshments,* door prize
8:05 PM Speaker:

Denise Wight

*Please remember to bring a cup.

**May 1: Elizabeth Murdock
Wind Power at Altamont Pass**



Terry Spivey, USDA Forest Service, Bugwood.org



Birding Information

Linus Eukel, Executive Director of the Muir Heritage Land Trust, will speak about strategic planning and managing change and growth for the Trust. He will bring us up to date on land acquisition, land use planning, stewardship, and public education activities.

Since its founding in 1988, the Muir Heritage Land Trust has worked to preserve hundreds of acres of key open space in Contra Costa County. The Land Trust acquires land and conservation easements from willing sellers, and promotes environmental education for school children throughout the county.

Linus is a native of Walnut Creek. He graduated from UC Berkeley with an AB in music and holds a Master of Music degree from the University of New York.

Welcome New Members

Dan Campos	Concord
Susan Jensen	Walnut Creek
J. Padilla	Walnut Creek
Sandra Ritchie	Concord

Norah Bain and family thank all MDAS friends for their kind messages of sympathy and encouragement on the death of her husband Hugh Bain.

Why Birds Sing

» Continued from Page 1

mimics other species, but that the other common goldfinch, the American Goldfinch, doesn't?

Did you know that the female House Finch finds males with the longest song the most attractive?

Did you know that Turkey Vultures do not vocalize because they lack a syrinx and specialized muscles, but can still make sounds by hissing, grunting, and stamping their feet?

Did you know that Brown-headed Cowbirds, a species which most birders disdain because of their parasitic breeding habits, has the greatest frequency range of any single bird song, spanning 7 to 11 kHz with its 'lug, glug, glee' song?

Did you know that Greater Roadrunners, which can be seen along Mines Road in Alameda County, don't go 'beep, beep', but instead make a sad descending coo?

Did you know that the 'yank, yank' of the Red-breasted Nuthatch, commonly heard in the East Bay hills, gets faster as the bird becomes more excited, almost to the point of becoming a trill?

You have to be careful when birding by ear. Denise once was censusing Black Rails in Martinez by listening to their 'kee-kee cur' call. She knew that something was amiss when she heard this secretive marsh dweller calling from the top of a telephone pole. It was, instead, a Northern Mockingbird, who had added the call to his repertoire.

MDAS Presents Al McNabney Award to Diana Granados



Diana Granados is flanked by President Jimm Edgar (right) and Vice President Mike Williams (left) as she receives the Al McNabney Environmental Distinction Award.

Brian Murphy photos



Jenny Papka, Native Bird Connections co-founder, introduces a guest as part of the Birding Information presentation by Diana Granados and herself.

At the March general meeting your MDAS Board was very pleased to award to Diana Granados the Al McNabney Environmental Distinction Award. The late Al McNabney, for whom the award is named, was Conservation Chairman of MDAS and an environmental leader of Contra Costa County for years.

Diana Granados spent 26 years at the Lindsay Wildlife Museum and was collections manager when she left. She was on the ground floor of the museum with Gary Bogue. She and Gary were the glue that held that museum together.

In 2000 she left to form Native Birds Connections. The goal of NBC is to introduce and further wildlife education, principally in classrooms. NBC also cares for non-releasable birds. They take birds to classrooms to bring nature to students. Diana believes that this education is of paramount importance to saving the environment.

Through her work at the Museum and at NBC Diana has taught so much to so many. She has imparted her love and respect for wildlife to us, hundreds of do-

cents, and tens of thousands of students and thousands of others. NBC visits 24,000 students and people every year. Diana serves on many wildlife boards and has given thousands and thousands of hours to helping wildlife and the environment.

In presenting this award Mike Williams, Vice President and long time personal friend of Diana said: *There is no one in this county that more deserves this award than Diana Granados. There has never been anyone in this county that has done as much as Diana to further environmental and wildlife education. I would like to read you what this certificate says. "Mount Diablo Audubon Society proudly honors Diana Granados. Her 3 R's 'Respect, Responsibility and Reverence' serve as a true guide for developing enduring environmental practices." Thank you Diana. It is a great personal honor to be able to present this certificate to you on behalf of MDAS.*

Mike Williams also presented to Diana a check for \$1000 as Mount Diablo Audubon Society's effort to further the work of Native Bird Connections.

Observations

By Steve Glover

Submit Contra Costa County sightings to Steve Glover at countylin@sbcbglobal.net or (925) 997-1112.

The wintering **Brant** at Miller-Knox Regional Shoreline at Point Richmond continued to at least 2/2 (LL). A male **Eurasian Wigeon** was along the Bay Trail near the Richmond Dump on 2/25 (ES). Single **Long-tailed Ducks** were near the Richmond Marina on 2/14 (DW) and Carquinez Regional Shoreline west of Martinez Regional Shoreline on 2/20 (DW). A female **Barrow's Goldeneye** was somewhat out of place at McNabney Marsh on 2/9 (HH).

American White Pelicans were noted at Contra Loma Regional Park near Antioch on 2/7 (15+; PG), Contra Loma on 2/12 (70; PS), Lafayette Reservoir on 2/16 (2; JS), and Contra Loma Regional Park on 2/23 (12; PS)

An adult **Bald Eagle** was at Lafayette Reservoir, a consistent wintering site, on 2/3 (HN). A **Ferruginous Hawk** was at Briones Regional Park on 2/16 (LL).

A Large flock of **Long-billed Curlews** at Clifton Court Forebay near Byron on 2/7 included 237 birds (PG). Two **Ruddy Turnstones**, uncommon in the county but frequently noted recently, were near "Sandpiper Spit" on Point Richmond on 2/3 (NB). Single **Surfbirds** were at the Richmond Marina on 2/3 (DM) and at the San Pablo Regional Shoreline, Pinole on 2/27 (DW). The Pinole bird may represent the furthest to the northeast that this species has been detected in the county. A **Red Phalarope** made a very rare appearance in the county at the Richmond Sewage Ponds on 2/16 (JR).

An adult **Western Gull**, rare so far inland in the county, was at Clifton Court Forebay near Bryon on 2/7 (PG). A first-year **Glaucous Gull**, very rare for the county, was near the Richmond Dump on 2/24 (JL).

A **Pileated Woodpecker** was heard calling near the Chabot Observatory just inside Alameda County on 2/9 (Bob Power).

Two **Grasshopper Sparrows** were a surprising find at Point Pinole Regional Shoreline on 2/27 (DW). It is unclear if the birds wintered at this location or were early migrants. Single **White-throated Sparrows** were at Contra Loma Regional Park, Antioch on 2/7 (PG) and at an Alamo feeder from 11/11 to at least 3/9

Ornithological Opportunities

Olympic BirdFest 2008, Sequim, WA, April 4-6. Visit the rain shadow of the Olympic Peninsula to discover the birds of the coastal Pacific Northwest—Marbled Murrelets, Rhinoceros Auklets, Harle-

quin Ducks, American Dippers, Black Oystercatchers, Long-tailed Ducks, and more. Guided field trips, a boat cruise in the Strait of Juan de Fuca, silent auction, and a salmon banquet with the Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe. New this year: A three-day, two-night birding cruise of the San Juan Islands immediately following BirdFest.

Contact: Dungeness River Audubon Center, P.O. Box 2450, Sequim, WA 98382; 360-681-4076; or go online at www.olympicbirdfest.org.

Godwit Days Spring Migration Bird Festival, Arcata. April 17-21. Flock to Arcata for the 13th annual Godwit Days and choose from over 100 field trips and workshops and browse the vendors at the community center. An extraordinary birding adventure awaits you between the redwoods and Humboldt Bay. Go to www.godwitdays.com for more details and to register on-line.

Heron Festival & Wildflower Brunch, Kelseyville, April 26-27. Presented by Redbud Audubon Society and Clear Lake

(JR). Single "**Slate-colored**" **Dark-eyed Juncos** were at the Eugene O'Neill House in Danville on 2/17 (CA) and Point Pinole Regional Shoreline on 2/27 (DW).

A male **Lawrence's Goldfinch** made a surprise appearance at an Alamo feeder on 3/8 (JR).

Cheryl Abel, Nel Benningshof, Phil Gordon, Hugh Harvey, Laura Look, John Luther, Don Murphy, Harold Newman, Bob Power, Jean Richmond, Jim Roethe, Jeanne Savarese, Paul Schorr, Emilie Strauss, Denise Wight

John Muir Birthday—Earth Day Celebration, Saturday, April 19 at the John Muir National Historic Park, 4202 Alhambra Ave., Martinez. 10 AM to 4 PM. Music, interactive environmental exhibits, children's activities, carriage rides, bagpipers, Bay Area National Parks information, wildlife displays, mural painting, native plant garden tours, silent auction. Exploring Mt. Wanda hike, 8:30 to 10 AM. Alternative energy car show featuring a variety of low emissions vehicles, 10 AM to 2 PM. Wildflower walk on Mt. Wanda led by Ranger Cheryl Abel, 11 AM. John Muir Birthday Celebration at 2 PM! www.johnmuirearthday.com.

State Park Interpretive Association, the Heron Festival is a celebration of the Great Blue Herons' return to their nesting sites around Clear Lake. Activities include pontoon boat rides to view the heronry and guided kayak trips to view birds on Kelsey Creek. Interesting nature presentations are held at Clear Lake State Park along with

informative booths, children's activities, and a Wildflower Brunch. Guided bird walks are available. Contact: www.heron-festival.org, Redbud Audubon Society, or call 1.800.525.3743.

14th Annual Kern River Valley Spring Nature Festival, April 30–May 6, at Audubon-California's Kern River Preserve in Weldon. The Kern Valley Spring Nature Festival is a celebration of our natural diversity at the

height of spring abundance. Spring bird migration creates an exciting time for birders visiting the Kern Valley Spring Nature Festival. The last five festivals have averaged 233 bird species! The region centered on the Kern River Valley hosts 138 butterfly species (68%+ of California's lepidoptera), 2,000+ species of plants (a third of California's flora), and the highest mammal diversity in the United States (115 species)! Field trips are limited to between five and twenty people to insure the highest quality and most enjoyable birding and natural history experience possible. The Festival offers a variety of trips and activities for all interests and age levels. kern.audubon.org/bioregion.htm.

Q

This friendly, cavity-nesting backyard bird lives year-round in California

west of the Sierra and from southwestern Oregon to northwestern Baja California. It wasn't given its present name until 1996.

Unscramble these letters, or turn to Page 7 to learn more.

AEIKMOOSTTU

Field Trip Schedule

By Hugh Harvey

April

- 5 Saturday Garin Regional Park
- 12 Saturday Pine Canyon
- 15 Tuesday North Briones Regional Park
- 29 Tuesday Del Puerto Canyon

Come birding with us!

May

- 3 Saturday Mines Road
- 8 Thursday Mitchell Canyon
- 14 Wednesday Mount Diablo State Park
- 17 Saturday East Contra Costa County
- 22 Thursday West Briones Regional Park

June

- 5 Saturday Garin Regional Park
- 12 Saturday Pine Canyon
- 15 Tuesday North Briones Regional Park
- 29 Tuesday Del Puerto Canyon

③ Saturday, April 5 • Garin Regional Park

Leader: Fred Safier, 937-2906.



*Western Screech-Owl.
Photographed at
Garin Regional
Park.*

Carpool leaves 7:15 AM from Sycamore Valley Road Park and Ride. Meet in parking lot at the end of Garin Road at 8:00 AM. Take I-680 south and I-580 west. Exit on East Castro Valley Blvd. and continue west. Turn left onto Crow Canyon Road and go under the freeway. Crow Canyon Road becomes Grove Way and then A Street. At A Street and SR 238 (Foothill Blvd.), turn left. Foothill Blvd./SR 238 becomes Mission Blvd. Go south about 3 miles to Garin Road, turn left, and follow to its end. Spring migrants will be our goal.

① Tuesday, April 29 Del Puerto Canyon

Leader: Jean Richmond, 837-2843.

Carpool leaves at 7:30 AM from Sycamore Valley Road Park and Ride. Meet on Del Puerto Canyon Road west of I-5 at 9 AM at Patterson Exit off I-5 (56 miles from Sycamore Valley Road). Take I-580 east to I-5 south. We will stop at the Westley Rest Area, as there are no facilities on trip until our lunch stop. Canyon Wren, Costa's Hummingbird, Greater Roadrunner and other goodies.

③ Saturday, April 12 • Pine Canyon

Leader: Nancy Wenninger, 938-7987.

Meet in parking lot at end of Castle Rock Road at 8 AM. Turn south on Walnut Avenue from the intersection with Ygnacio Valley Road in Walnut Creek. At the traffic circle, turn right and continue on Castle Rock Road past the high school to the end, which is the parking lot for Castle Rock Recreation Area and Diablo Foothills Regional Park. We will hike into Pine Canyon at least as far as the Castle Rocks. The trail crosses Pine Creek several times. Be prepared to carry lunch and liquids. Spring migrants and Peregrine Falcons.

③ Tuesday, April 15

North Briones Regional Park

Leader: Cheryl Abel, 335-0176.

Meet 8 AM in the parking lot at the north entrance of Briones Regional Park. Take Old Briones Road off Alhambra Valley Road. Wildflowers, spring birds and poison oak are along shaded trails. A continuation through grasslands to Sindicich Lagoons makes this trip about 3 miles round trip. Bring liquids.

Field trips are open to members and non-members, beginners and advanced birders. Weather or other contingencies may require changes. For updates, visit the MDAS website at www.diabloaudubon.com/index/php.

Because most trips do not return until late afternoon, bring a lunch and join us during our midday break.

Category ①: Easy, little or no walking, smooth paths

Category ②: Moderate, one mile or more, possibly rough terrain

Category ③: Difficult, extensive walking on rough terrain.

Carpool locations: **Sun Valley**—Southwest corner of the Sun Valley Mall parking lot at Willow Pass Road and Contra Costa Boulevard in Concord. **El Nido Ranch Road**—Take the Acalanes Road/Upper Happy Valley Road exit off SR 24, west of Lafayette. El Nido Ranch Road is parallel to and north of the freeway. Park just east of the intersection with Acalanes Road and on the north side of El Nido Ranch Road. **Sycamore Valley Road Park and Ride Lot**—Just south of Danville, exit I-680 at Sycamore Valley Road to the east; the Park and Ride lot is on the left.

Spring Shoreline Cleanup

Saturday, May 3, 2008

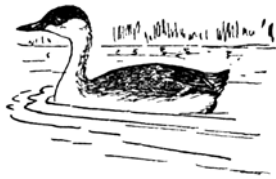
8:30 AM – 12 noon

Martinez Regional Shoreline

This winter's tides have deposited lots of flotsam along the shoreline of one of our favorite birding areas. Join other MDAS volunteers as we help to restore this important site.

To get to Martinez Regional Shoreline, cross the tracks in downtown Martinez by the old railroad station on Ferry Street. Staging will be in the first parking lot on the left side of N. Court Street. Meet at 8:30 for a safety briefing before we head out for the cleanup of the beaches and riprap along the Pickleweed Trail. Disposable gloves will be provided.

Call Nancy Wenninger at (925) 938-7987 for more information.



American Eared Grebe

Columbus nigricollis californicus

Birds of Golden Gate Park
Joseph Mailliard • 1930

Trip Reports

Tomales Bay State Park, February 23.
The field trip was cancelled due to inclement weather,

Maury Stern

Walnut Creek City Parks, March 5.
Twenty members met in Heather Farm Park in Walnut Creek for a visit to four city parks. After walking around the large natural pond in Heather Farm, we drove to Howe-Homestead Park and its community garden. We then walked a portion of the Sugarloaf-Shell Ridge Trail before taking a walk around the lower portions of the Sugarloaf Open Space, which is located in the south of the city off Rudgear Road. Altogether we had 50 species of birds. Only a few members were able to spot part of the hiding Moorhen in Heather Farm; the Green Heron was not so bashful. Western Bluebirds in Howe-Homestead were very brilliant, a Bewick's Wren was found along the trail, and a Say's Phoebe, American Kestrel and copulating Red-tailed Hawks were seen at the Open Space. *Hugh B. Harvey*

Native Plants for Native Birds

By Pat Bacchetti

Manzanitas

Our hills are coming alive with the blossoms of two of our best-known chaparral shrubs: Manzanita (*Arctostaphylos*) and Ceanothus. Manzanitas are a diverse group of plants in the heath family, growing from the coast to the high mountains. Blooming from as early as September though the spring, the manzanitas are dramatic evergreens with fragrant blossoms, sculpted bark, and small apple-like fruits. The Spanish named them 'manzanitas,' or 'little apples.' Many cultivars are available for the garden, and a good location and knowledge of their needs will give you a plant of lasting beauty.

As habitat plants, manzanitas fulfill several important requirements. Though primarily pollinated by native and European honey bees, the fall-blooming varieties act as an important source of nectar to hummingbirds, since few other natives are in bloom at that time. Their thick foliage also serves as a source of cover, a home for insects, and a source of berries in the fall. The berries are eaten by quail, thrushes, foxes, squirrels, and coyotes.

General cultivation requirements are full sun, well-drained acidic to neutral soil, and deep occasional water. Most do not tolerate alkaline soil or wet conditions, and they can be subject to a variety of fungal infections if conditions are not right. They also prefer to be in the open, with good air circulation, and they don't thrive under trees.

Plants range from low prostrate groundcovers to large erect shrubs. *Arctostaphylos edmundsii* is a coastal groundcover that has contributed several easy-to-grow and low-maintenance cultivars for the garden. They also tolerate a wider variety of soil types and are not as particular about drainage. Bert Johnson manzanita (*Arctostaphylos edmundsii* var. *parvifolia* 'Bert Johnson') and Carmel Sur manzanita (*A. edmundsii* 'Carmel Sur') are two of the best-known. 'Bert Johnson' is known for its profuse bloom, conch-pink blossoms, tiny dark green leaves, and bronzy new foliage. A mounding variety, it grows from



Arctostaphylos "Howard McMinn"

1–3 ft. tall to 4–6 ft. in width. By contrast, 'Carmel Sur', though vigorous and not picky about conditions, rarely blooms and stays below two feet in height. It can reach 6 feet in diameter, and readily smothers annual weeds. Both of these low forms can be used as attractive options to spill over walls, for erosion control on hillsides, or fill little-used areas of the garden.

The upright shrubs of red bark and dark green upward-facing leaves that are so prevalent in our hills also make beautiful specimens. The two stalwarts of the garden are *A. bakeri* 'Louis Edmunds' and *Arctostaphylos* 'Howard McMinn'. Both are easy to grow, handsome shrubs that can be pruned into specimen plants of up to 10 feet, or used as informal screens with other shrubs. Howard McMinn manzanita also tolerates more water, so can be used in gardens mixed with non-natives.

Generally, manzanitas are hardy plants. easy to grow. But they are also extremely variable in their origin in nature, so check their specific needs before you plant. One of my favorite things about these plants is the peeling mahogany bark so characteristic of the species. Even smooth-barked varieties peel once a year at the end of the growing season in spring, signaling summer dormancy. *California Native Plants for the Garden*, by Bornstein, Fross, and O'Brien, and *Native Treasures* by Nevin Smith have extensive information about manzanitas in the garden. Both books are indispensable guides for gardeners wanting to create a refuge for birds.



the field's owner to delay harvest by 30 days, allowing the Tricolored Blackbirds to complete their nesting cycle. One year later, Audubon California is gearing up to conduct a statewide Tricolored Blackbird census on April 25-27, to come up with a contemporary population estimate for the species! Today's smaller survey will help further understand population and distribution patterns for this species.

Mike Robertson and I began our search in the mid-afternoon allowing for time to scan various wetlands along the Martinez and Concord shoreline. These wetlands in part make up the Concord Marshes Important Bird Area and were once part of a sprawling network of sinewy sloughs, creeks, and marshes draining the watersheds and highlands of Diablo and Contra Costa ridges into the Carquinez Straits and Suisun Bay along the city shores of Martinez, Concord, and Pittsburg. Now these wetlands are scattered in patchy distribution, dissected and disconnected from each other by roads, railways, neighborhoods, landfills, and industry. Mike's decades old fishing map of the area depicted many historic creeks long since channelized and sent underground in culverts and pipes, removed from light and life. The wetlands that remain, while scattered, and tattered, are perhaps more important than ever, serving as a last refuge for biodiversity and providing other key

Tricolored Blackbird is a Bird Species of Special Concern in California

ecological services such as water purification and carbon sequestration.

Mike and I visited Martinez Regional Shoreline, and McNabney, Shell, and McVicar Marshes. Scanning the shores, we focused on stands of cattails and reeds. The wind floated fluffy cattail seeds across the marshes. Black movements in the reeds drew our focus, but we did not see Tricolored Blackbirds, but rather blackbirds of three other sorts: Brewer's and Red-winged Blackbirds, as well as Great-

tailed Grackles. Our next stop was the water treatment plant, whose sewage aerators were indeed teeming with blackbirds, but Red-winged only.

Driving through the network of industry, construction, and roadworks, we can make out wetlands in the distance, inaccessible through the modern concrete jungle. As the daylight fades we make our way east along Waterfront Road until we reach an imposing security gate checkpoint at the base of the Tesoro oil refinery. A testament to modern chemistry and plumbing, the plant is an impressive and complicated construction of pipes, cisterns and smokestacks. The plant's impacts to air quality however, were immediately palpable: the air stiflingly thick with petrochemical pollution.



500.

500. Tricolored Blackbird (*Agelaius tricolor*).
Ad. ♂. Similar to No. 498, but glossier, lesser wing-coverts darker, median wing-coverts *white*; in winter black more or less edged with grayish brown; median wing-coverts dingy. *Ad. ♀.* No rusty; above blackish edged with grayish; below black bordered with whitish. *Notes.* "Said to be quite different" from those of No. 498. (Bendire.) (See page 178.)

Range.—Northern Lower California north to southern Oregon; local in valleys of interior.

California Proposition 65 signs warned of carcinogenic chemical exposure on site although the security guards stationed in the open air took no visible precaution.

After obtaining permits from the security guards we made our way into the heart of the plant on our way to the wetlands beyond. We soon left industry behind us and were back amid the serenity of Point Edith Wildlife Area, a 760-acre marsh bordering Suisun Bay to the north, and the gated wetlands of the Concord Naval Weapons Station to the east. Away from the oil refinery, the air quality was noticeably improved. Mike and I drove the short distance of the road and scanned for Tricolored Blackbirds. Reeds and cattails growing on both sides of the marsh made it hard to see far into the wetlands so we hopped up on the tailgate of Mike's truck in order to improve our vantage point.

All was quiet on the marsh.

As light descended and shadows grew longer the marsh became increasingly active. Isolated calls of rails beckoned from the reeds, Pacific Chorus Frog calls swelled en masse, and then out of the sky came the

lazy lilt of the undulating flight-pattern of blackbirds. Utility wires and poles, and tall shrubs, vacant moments before, were now covered by hundreds of blackbirds. The sharp glint of yellow in the eye marked many of these as Brewer's Blackbirds. Then came the chirps, trills, whirs, multiphonic whistles and clicks sounding so much like Red-winged Blackbirds. We strained in vain to see the blazing red shoulder patches of the Red-winged Blackbirds. We scrutinized the flock, studying each individual as we scanned down the power lines and on top of the shrubs. There amongst the numerous Brewer's Blackbirds, a few blackbirds stood out. Adorned with distinctive white epaulets, the Tricolored Blackbirds, outnumbered 200 to 1 by the Brewer's, stood out amongst the Brewer's Blackbirds like army generals amongst mere privates.

Activity continued to pick up, now flocks were coming in from seemingly all directions. Mike and I split up to better cover the area as sunlight waned and the winds picked up. Within a half hour all the blackbirds had settled down, many moving out of view and deeper into the marsh to retire for the evening. In that last flurry of crepuscular activity we observed 20 Tricolored Blackbirds.

Satisfied by both the strong finish and a generally good day of birding in the Concord Marshes Important Bird Area, Mike and I packed up, and like blackbirds, headed home for the night.

Volunteers are needed for Audubon California's 2008 statewide Tricolored Blackbird survey. The colony locations and numbers of Tricolored Blackbirds change from year to year, making it impossible to track without the help of volunteers across the state. The survey will take place over one full day that is convenient for you between April 25th and 27th, 2008. Additional days of survey following this will also be welcomed and of great value. If you are interested in participating, please contact Rodd Kelsey (530) 795-0660 or rkelsey@audubon.org.

Mike Perlmutter is Bay Area Conservation Coordinator for Audubon California. McNabney Marsh photo is his. Illustration is from Color Key to North American Birds by Frank M. Chapman, 1912.

Cheers for Our Volunteers

Are you dedicated to habitat conservation and environmental education, as Mount Diablo Audubon Society is?

MDAS offers many opportunities to meet fellow members and to support our environmental protection and conservation efforts. Perhaps foremost among these roles is to serve on the Board of Directors. At each May meeting, in accordance with the bylaws, we elect officers for the following fiscal year. If you would like to run for any of the positions, please call any of the Board members, whose contact numbers are given on Page 7. Specifically, at this time, please consider whether your skills include serving as Secretary.

Please respond soon, so that the slate of candidates can be published in the May *Quail*.

Other opportunities to help arise throughout the year. Let Shirley Ellis know how you wish to participate. You can greet people at the Earth Day event in April, at the McNabney Marsh celebration in May, or at Heritage Day at Borges Ranch in June, for example.



Oak Titmouse *Bæolophus inornatus*



Brian Murphy photo

The Plain Titmouse was split into two species, Oak Titmouse and Juniper Titmouse, following UC Berkeley studies of genetics, morphology, ecology and voice. Ralph Hoffmann wrote (in 1927): *If one follows the [squeaky little notes], one sees a rather trim brown bird with a marked crest and a bright black eye hammering a seed energetically against a limb, gleaning among the foliage, and frequently hopping*

about at the base of the tree, but almost always in or near oaks.

“Titmouse” is derived from Old Icelandic “*titr*,” meaning small and Anglo-Saxon “*mase*,” meaning small bird, so, because this is an etymology different from the Latin “*mus*”—mouse, if you should see a pair, shouldn’t they be titmouses? And these neat “small, small birds” do form permanent mating pairs.

the Quail

is published 10 times a year by the

Mount Diablo Audubon Society.

a nonprofit organization dedicated to habitat conservation and environmental education •

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The Garden Center

Mount Diablo Audubon Society meets on the first Thursday of each month, except July and August, in the Camellia Room of The Gardens at Heather Farms, 1540 Marchbanks Drive, Walnut Creek. Everyone is invited.



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Tricolored Blackbird • Courtesy Rodd Kelsey

A Day at the Concord Marshes Important Bird Area

The Search for Tricolored Blackbirds By Mike Perlmutter

Balmy and bright, conditions on this mid-February day seemed auspicious for birding, although Mount Diablo Audubon member Mike Robertson and I would need some extra luck for our task of the day: to find and census rare Tricolored Blackbirds along the Concord shoreline. This survey, coordinated by Dr. Bob Meese, a Tricolored Blackbird researcher from UC Davis, under contract with CA Fish and Game and US Fish & Wildlife, was an attempt to identify evening roosts of Tricolored Blackbirds.

The Tricolored Blackbird is a Bird Species of Special Concern in California, and is one of three priority conservation species for Audubon California (the other two being California Condor and Western



McNabney Marsh

Snowy Plover). Tricolored Blackbird also bears the unfavorable distinction of inclusion on the Audubon Watchlist (red-listed in California and yellow-listed nationwide). These distinctions call attention to conservation of threatened, declining, or even state-extirpated species that may not receive protections under state and/or federal endangered species laws.

California supports 99% of the world's estimated 250,000-300,000 Tricolored Blackbirds. The species nests colonially, leaving large portions of the population

vulnerable to localized disturbance and sudden land use changes. Indeed, loss of wetland habitat has shifted nesting sites to agricultural fields, where massive nest failure can result if crop harvest precedes fledging of chicks. Nest failure of large colonies can prove devastating to the long-term recovery of Tricolored Blackbirds. Last year this real threat was narrowly abated on a 13-acre wheat field where southern California's largest colony was breeding. Audubon California and the San Bernardino Audubon Society paid

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