



the Quail

Mount Diablo Audubon Society

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

www.diabloaudubon.com/index.php

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March 2006

Two Years Photographing for Cornell • Larry Arbanas

Birders, if you often wish to see detail more rich than your binoculars or scope provide, you will thoroughly enjoy our program on March 2. Bay Area bird and nature filmmaker, **Larry Arbanas**, is part of a Cornell University project to collect high definition film footage of the behavior of all North American bird species. The goal is to complete a definitive visual media collection of American birds for the Macaulay Library by 2009.

Using his recent high definition footage Larry has whipped up a bevy of "mini-bird movies" starring many of our local favorites. You will see the dancing courtship of Western Grebes on Clearlake and close-up footage of the very active Pygmy Nuthatch as it forages high in local conifers. Follow the amazing 'Water Ouzel', our American Dipper, as it patrols its rushing mountain stream and tends its nest. His White-tailed Kite footage is breathtaking. During the past year, Larry has devoted much time to filming the Bald Eagle. As we go to press, he is filming the only known Bald Eagle nest in Inyo National Forest in the Eastern Sierra. He will share that amazing footage with us.

This month, Larry leaves for South Africa with John Robinson. While there, he will film for Cornell, and for John, as he records their visits to the Rietviel Dam Nature Reserve, the National Botanical Garden, Kruger National Park, the Mkuze Game Preserve, the Shongweni Game Reserve, the African Penguin Breeding Colony, and locations in Cape Town. Using Larry's footage, John Robinson will present their adventures at our general meeting on October 5.

In 1989, after witnessing the devastation of the Exxon-Valdez oil spill, Larry left commercial video production to focus on bird and nature filmmaking. He has pro-



THE MACAULAY LIBRARY at the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, formerly the Library of Natural Sounds, has long been respected for its valuable collection of bird song and other animal sounds. In 2001, the Library began an equally significant catalog of high-definition video recordings of animal behavior. This is a single frame from a sample recording.

duced finished pieces for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and wildlife rehabilitation centers. He believes strongly in the mission of nature festivals and produces video for their parent organization Watchable Wildlife and for other organizations involved in avian and environmental study, research, and education.

Birding Information

Brian Holt, a Senior Planner with the East Bay Regional Park District, will give a brief overview of the Concord Naval Weapons Station reuse process. He will outline the history of the Station and describe its natural resources. In addition, he will discuss how EBRPD will be involved in planning the future use of the site, what EBRPD will advocate for the site, and why EBRPD feels that the preservation of parks and open space on the site should be a top priority.

Mr. Holt is part of the Interagency Planning Department. His background is in environ-

mental studies and environmental planning and regulation throughout the Bay Area and California. He is currently on the Board of the S.F. Bay Area Chapter of the Association of Environmental Professionals.

Meeting Schedule

The next general meeting of Mount Diablo Audubon Society will be **Thursday, March 2**, in the Camellia Room of The Gardens at Heather Farm, 1540 Marchbanks Drive, Walnut Creek.

(See map on page 7).

- 6:30 PM Doors open
- 7:00 PM Birding Information
- 7:25 PM Announcements
- 7:40 PM Social time, refreshments*, door prize
- 8:05 PM Program

* Please remember to bring a cup.

Welcome New Members

Althea Bates	Pleasant Hill
Beverly Bortin	Walnut Creek
Richard Cimino	Pleasanton
Marcella Colarich	Concord
Don and Susan Couch	Orinda
Kathleen Evon	Concord
Debbie Fletcher	Walnut Creek
Mildred Freitas	Danville
Janet Helmholz	Lafayette
Dora Henel	Lafayette
Nadine Hitchcock	Walnut Creek
Katherine Johns	Pleasant Hill
Carol Lane	Concord
David Loveall	Danville
Marie Lowell	Walnut Creek
Renette Macintyre	Walnut Creek
Victor Maletic	Antioch
Brian & Rachel Meek	Walnut Creek
Richard Morrison	Lafayette
Valerie Nesbitt	San Ramon
Nathalie Oram	Alamo
Darryl Ott	Walnut Creek
Barbara Perry	Danville
Judy Robertson	Pleasant Hill
Vicki and Brad Schwab	Pleasant Hill
Judy Storro Shepard	Alamo
Stephen Snow	Clayton
William Stephenson	Martinez
Howard Stertz	Walnut Creek
James and Louise Tanno	Lafayette
Sidney Unruch	Concord
Cameron Ward	Pleasant Hill
Claudia Whitnah	Martinez
R. Claude Williamson	Danville
Barbara Yost	Walnut Creek
Stefanie Yurus	Walnut Creek



Some say that when this bird sings, it sounds like a Robin with a sore throat.

The male bird's red pigment is rhodoxanthin, a pigment rare in birds. It is not manufactured by the bird; instead, it must be acquired from the diet, presumably from insects that themselves acquire the pigment from plants.

Unscramble these letters, or turn to page 4 for the answer.

AAEEEGNNRRSTTW

SPEAKING OF CONSERVATION

Preserving Landscapes _____ By Nancy Wenninger



Sycamore Valley Open Space Preserve

As the Bay Area's population continues to grow, where we don't build becomes as important as where we do. Public open spaces define urban form and the character of our communities. They provide scenic backdrops and buffers, opportunities for passive and active recreation, protection of habitat for endangered and threatened species, and preservation of traditional land uses such as farming, ranching and forestry.

In September 2005, East Bay Regional Park District dedicated the Sycamore Valley Open Space Regional Preserve (SVOSRP). Nearly surrounded by residential development, this parkland contains some of the last undeveloped open space in the Sycamore Creek/Camino Tassajara corridor.

The Sycamore Valley has a 150-year history of agricultural uses, including sheep- and cattle-grazing and dry crops such as wheat and barley. In the early 1980s, local planners and concerned citizens recognized that this bucolic landscape was being threatened by large-scale residential development. In response the Town of Danville set aside large tracts of land as open space to maintain some of its rural character.

SVOSRP consists of two such open space dedications on parallel ridgelines north and south of Camino Tassajara. The northerly area is Short Ridge (368 acres),

primarily grassland with scattered oak savanna. The southerly area is Sherburne Hills (328 acres), which is entirely grassland vegetation. With elevations from 600' in the flatlands to 1,000' on the ridgelines, the preserve is generally steep and erosion-prone.

The dominant plant community is the California annual grassland. Nonnative grasses inadvertently introduced to California by early European

settlers are a major component. Wildlife supported by the grassland include Western Meadowlark, Grasshopper and Lark Sparrows, and small mammals which provide prey for raptors and coyotes. Groves of oaks and buckeyes provide shade and cover, as well as food for birds, deer and other animals. Three small ponds and localized springs provide limited riparian and wetland habitat.

The ranching traditions of the past are being preserved on this open space through the Park District's use of livestock grazing as a resource management tool and to reduce the threat of wildfires to adjacent homes.

The Preserve has no developed recreational facilities but offers trails for hikers, mountain bikers and equestrians. The trails are somewhat challenging, but the vistas on the ridgelines are worth the workout. Those who brave the climb can enjoy 360° views of the East Bay's spectacular landscape.

**PUBLIC OPEN SPACES
DEFINE THE CHARACTER
OF OUR COMMUNITIES.**

Field Trip Schedule

By Elizabeth Dickey

Field Trip Reports

March

- 1 Wednesday Emeryville/Berkeley Waterfront
- 4 Saturday Bodega Bay
- 9 Thursday Lafayette Reservoir
- 15 Wednesday San Leandro Reservoir
- 18 Saturday Black Diamond
- 23 Thursday San Pablo Creek
- 29 Wednesday Lagunitas Lake

April

- 1 Saturday Garin Regional Park
- 5 Wednesday Skyline Parks
- 13 Thursday Laurel Canyon
- 15 Saturday Pine Canyon
- 19 Wednesday Ida Clayton Road
- 27 Thursday Del Puerto Canyon

Field trips are open to members and non-members, beginners and masters. Weather or other contingencies may require changes. For updates, read the *Quail*, visit the MDAS website at www.diabloaudubon.com/index/php, or call the Audubon taped recording at (925) 283-8266. Customary carpool expense is 37½ cents per mile, plus tolls and entry fees, shared among driver and riders. 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 parking lot at Willow Pass Road and Contra Costa Boulevard in Concord. La Gonda—From I-680 southbound, exit on El Pintado, turn right, and right again onto LaGonda. From I-680 northbound, exit at El Cerro Blvd., Danville, turn left, then right on LaGonda, and drive about ¼ mile north to El Pintado. Acalanes—Pleasant Hill Road, just north of SR 24, at the corner of Acalanes Road.

March Field Trips

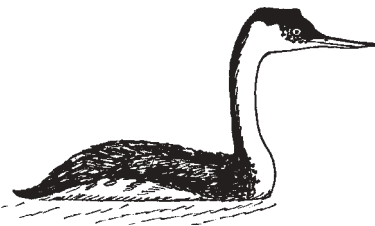
Wednesday, March 1. **Emeryville and Berkeley Waterfronts.** Carpool leaves at 8:00 AM from Acalanes. Meet at 8:30 AM in the parking lot at the north end of the Emeryville Marina. Take Hwy. 24 to 880 West; turn north onto I-80. Take Powell St. exit, turn left on Powell; go out to Emeryville Marina, park in last lot near pier. May be cold and windy. Loons, grebes, and bay ducks.

Saturday, March 4. **Bodega Bay.** Carpool leaves at 7:30 AM from Sun Valley. Meet at 9:15 AM in parking lot of Tides Restaurant, which is on the bay side of SR1 opposite the Union 76 station. Call Elizabeth Dickey for information, 254-0486.

Thursday, March 9. **Lafayette Reservoir.** Meet at 8:00 AM at the top of the spillway. Parking costs \$4 and is prohibited at the bottom of the hill. A good place to learn local birds. Morning trip. Leader: Elizabeth Dickey, 254-0486 Category 2.

Wednesday, March 15. **San Leandro Reservoir.** Meet at 8 AM at Valle Vista staging area off Canyon Rd. From SR 24 west, take Orinda exit south; in Moraga, turn right onto Canyon Road. Leader: Maury Stern. Category 3.

Saturday, March 18. **Black Diamond.** Carpool leaves at 7:30 AM from Acalanes.



Meet at 8:15 AM in the parking lot at park. Go east on Ygnacio Valley and Kirker Pass Roads turn right on Buchanan Road. Go east on Buchanan to Somersville Road and turn right. Follow the road to the parking lot at the end. Woodland, chaparral, and some grassland birds. Leader: Eugenia Larsen. Category 3

Thursday, March 23. **San Pablo Creek.** This is the trip that was postponed in January. Meet at 8 AM in parking area of the northeast corner of Camino Pablo and Bear Creek Road. From SR 24 westbound, take Orinda exit north. Pass entry to Wagner Ranch School and turn right at stoplight. Park on left side of Bear Creek Road. Trail entry is about 100 yards down Bear Creek Road. Morning walk through riparian area to lake. In case of recent heavy rains we move to a different location that morning. Leader: Elizabeth Dickey, 254-0486. Category 2.

Wednesday, March 29. **Lagunitas-Bon Tempe.** This very popular birding trip

January 4, San Pablo Creek. Because of the heavy weekend rains, we decided to go to the west side of Briones Regional Park where we could walk on mostly paved roads. The birds seemed as eager as the four birders were to take advantage of the sunny day; thirty-three species were seen. Highlights were a group of seven Varied Thrushes and a Brown Creeper; an unusual sight was a lone first-year Cedar Waxwing.

Elizabeth Dickey

January 11, Sunol Regional Park.

Despite traffic problems and threats of rain, five members visited a very quiet Sunol Regional Park. Without any real rain we walked to Little Yosemite and kept waiting to see birds. Though we did eventually tally 34 species, the total numbers were very low, except for the 30+ Wild Turkeys along the entry road to the park. Also seen were White-throated Swifts, Acorn Woodpeckers, Yellow-billed Magpies and Hutton's Vireos. We heard the clear singing of a Wrentit on a sage-covered slope.

Hugh B. Harvey

January 19, Markham Arboretum. Two birders explored this quiet Concord park.—lots of mature trees, pines, oaks, and various deciduous trees with a background of eucalyptus. It was cold and the birds were not very active, but 16 species were seen. The highlight was a

Continued on page 5

to two jewel-like lakes in Marin passes through varied terrain (meadows, marshes, forests, ridges as well as along two lake shores) in the beautiful area of the northern slopes of Mount Tamalpais. Carpool leaves from Sun Valley at 7:30 AM. From first San Rafael exit, go left on 3rd Street and continue to Sir Francis Drake Blvd. and turn right. In Fairfax, go left on Fairfax Road. Turn left on Sky Oaks Road; take left fork to parking lot near foot of Lagunitas Dam. Approximate meeting time is 8:30 AM. We will hike around Lagunitas in the morning and walk over to Bon Tempe in the afternoon. We have often found Piliated Woodpeckers here, and sometimes Common Loon in breeding plumage. Leader: Jean Richmond, 837-2843. Category 3.

More to House Finches than Meets the Eye

By Mari Kimura and Dana Hawley

Did you know that some of the House Finches at your feeder carry hundreds of microscopic parasites in their blood? Or that House Finches in their native western range are more genetically diverse than those in their introduced eastern range?

These are some of the findings that came from our research as graduate students from Cornell University's Laboratory of Ornithology. We took advantage of the resources of Project FeederWatch, a Citizen Science program operated jointly by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, National Audubon Society, Bird Studies Canada, and Nature Canada. Every second week from November through April, volunteers watch their bird feeders on two successive days, and report the highest number of birds of each species that they see. Scientists compile this valuable information from thousands of similar participants across North America, and this allows them to study changes in population size and distributions of common bird species. Another use for these data is monitoring the spread of bird diseases. House Finches in particular are susceptible to a new form of conjunctivitis (eye disease) that is spreading slowly westward from its origin in the eastern United States.

Part of Dana's PhD research focused on whether genetic variation in House Finches affected their response to this disease. Mari's PhD research is about whether House Finches from California have different blood parasites than House Finches in New York. We both needed House Finch blood samples for different reasons so we planned an expedition to the Bay Area together. We found out from Project FeederWatch that lots of House Finches were reported from the home of Mimi and Ellis Myers in Moraga; we asked if we could sample birds at their feeders, and they were happy to oblige.

After returning to the lab, we extracted DNA from the blood samples. Mari used a technique called the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) to separate out and make thousands of copies of the relatively tiny amount of parasite DNA from the bird DNA, akin to finding a needle in a hay-



Mari Kimura weighs a House Finch (left), while Dana Hawley prepares to take a blood sample from a captive male House Finch. These two graduate students at Cornell's Laboratory of Ornithology sampled the birds in Moraga for doctoral thesis studies.

stack. Dana used the same technique, but she was interested in looking at the bird DNA to compare the genetic diversity of House Finches from California to other House Finches that she had already sampled all over the U.S.

Although House Finches are native to California, a few released pet birds founded the eastern North American population. In fact, these pet House Finches used to be called "Hollywood Finches" thanks to their California origin! Although the few escaped House Finches have since grown into millions of individuals in the eastern United States, Dana still found a "signature" in their DNA that the population was once tiny: all eastern House Finch populations had lower genetic diversity than all western, native House Finch populations. This difference in genetic diversity and its importance to disease resistance may be the key reason why the eye disease spread rapidly through the eastern population but slowed down once it reached native House Finch populations.

Mari found that lots (about 90 percent!) of House Finches in California harbored blood parasites. Some of these parasites are related to the ones that cause malaria in humans, though they wouldn't be able to survive in humans. After ana-

lyzing parasite DNA found in western and eastern House Finches, she discovered that there were at least five different genetic types of parasites. One of these types infected House Finches in all populations. However, one type was only in eastern birds and two were only in western birds. She is now trying to figure out the reasons for this pattern.

The research that took place in Moraga on a sunny spring day two years ago used common birds we see every day to answer some really interesting biological questions. Molecular tools are powerful in helping answer these questions.

If you would be interested in becoming a citizen scientist, visit the web site of the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology (www.birds.cornell.edu; FeederWatch information can be found at www.birds.cornell.edu/pfw/). Or call (800) 843-2473. You never know what you might learn about the birds in your own backyard!

Dana received her PhD last year and is continuing her House Finch disease research as a postdoctoral fellow at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. More on avian malaria can be found in Mari's article "The Mosquito Connection," in BirdScope for Autumn 2005, Cornell Lab. of Ornithology.

January Observations

By Steve Glover

A Cattle Egret put in a rare central county appearance at the golf course near the intersection of Port Chicago Highway and Highway 4 on 1/23 (JE). This species has been recorded on the Christmas Bird Count on only a handful of occasions.

Three pairs of Hooded Mergansers along Grayson Creek in Pleasant Hill through 12/30 were at a traditional wintering site (PK); a pair in Blackhawk 1/19 were at a more obscure location (JH).

An adult Bald Eagle at Lafayette Reservoir 1/21 (CR) was joined by a subadult bird on 1/26 (MB). This location and San Pablo Reservoir may be the most reliable spots in the county to find these birds in winter.

A cooperative Red Phalarope at Lafayette Reservoir first found 1/4 (MB) was enjoyed by numerous observers through at least 1/10 (JD). Though Red Phalaropes have been detected on only a few occasions in inland Contra Costa County, this bird was likely part of a widespread incursion into the interior of Northern California that occurred this winter, a phenomenon that takes place during many winters and is apparently caused by storms coming in off the Pacific Ocean.

White-throated Sparrows were widely detected this winter and included: one at a Pinole feeder since 10/23 that was joined by a second bird from 1/12-15 (LL); one at a Walnut Creek feeder through 1/18 (LG); a minimum of three birds (and possibly as many as five) on various dates since 11/27 at a Richmond feeder (LP); and one at an Alamo feeder through the winter (Jeanne ?). Birds detected away from feeders included one at Larkey Park, Walnut Creek 1/16 and at Vollmer Peak, Tilden Park 1/18 (both TR). Though there was speculation on the local listserv that such numbers are unusual, it has been long assumed by local birders that there are White-throated Sparrows visiting feeders throughout the county but that only a handful are noticed by people who report them.

For the third consecutive year, a female Hooded Oriole is wintering at a Concord feeder (PB). There are just a handful of such records for the county.

Polly Boissevain, Martha Breed, Joe Devine, Jimm Edgar, Laura Gee, James Hand, Patrick King, Laura Look, Lory Poulson, Cheryl Reynolds, Ted Robertson.

Field Trip Reports *Continued from page 3*

pair of Red-shouldered Hawks sitting close together in a eucalyptus tree.

Elizabeth Dickey

January 25, Thornton. A clear winter day to enjoy the Delta. Eight birders saw a total of 62 species. The day started with flocks of Tundra Swans and Snow Geese flying over; many Sandhill Cranes were seen along Woodbridge Road. Other sightings included seven species of dabbling ducks and seven species of raptors.

Elizabeth Dickey

February 1, East Contra Costa County. Four members and guests joined us for a quick look around many spots in East county. We started at the Round Valley staging area and had a number of nice birds there including Stellar's Jay which is unusual that far east of Mt. Diablo, interestingly enough. Of the 64 species seen during the day, the 5 Lewis's Woodpeckers seen around the visitor center at Los Vaqueros were most thrilling. A Golden Eagle also was there; and 2 large flocks of Long-billed Curlew were nice to see also. It is always encouraging to see so many Loggerhead Shrikes when one birds East county. Their numbers are down in so many places. Rain came a little sooner than expected so we had to quit about 2 PM.

Jimm Edgar

Cheers for Our Volunteers

By Shirley Ellis

The tenth annual San Francisco Bay Flyway Festival was held at Mare Island on January 28 and 29, 2006. The chapter of Mount Diablo Audubon has a table and a display board at this event. Eighteen volunteers helped make this a success.

The exhibitors and vendors have improved their displays and presentations with practice. The theme of the festival is conservation and many groups offer very interesting and informative materials. The highlight for me was seeing an Eagle Owl shown by Native Bird Connections. The bird was magnificent!

Shirley Ellis is our Volunteer Coordinator. Call her at 938-3703. It's certain that by taking a more active role, you'll make new friends, learn something new, join the fun, and make a difference.

Our volunteers for the event were:

Carolyn Erdman	Ann McGregor
Gene Fletcher	Brian Murphy
Harvey Green	Pam Rogers
Linda Green	Rita Tischler
Liede-Marie Haitsma	Beverly Walker
Alice Holmes	Cecil Williams
Ron Kline	Denise Willis
John Leggett	Bob Wisecarver
Pam Leggett	Don Yoder

The chapter recognizes their efforts and appreciates these volunteers.

Bob Wisecarver and Brian Murphy have the bat display and Don Yoder contributes his bluebird box display.

We are participating in several events during the year and more volunteers will be needed. Look in the mirror. Do you see someone who may consider making a move in this direction?

A little bit of shopping will mean a lot!

When you shop at

Diablo Foods ¶ **Lunardi's**
Safeway ¶ **Whole Foods**
Macy's ¶ **Office Max** ¶ **Big 5**

These and many other local merchants will donate as much as 4 percent of your purchase value to Mount Diablo Audubon.

This loyalty program is powered by eScrip. Find more details and a full list of participating merchants at www.eScrip.com. Or call John Leggett at 685-1959 if you have questions.

Sign up today on line. That's all you have to do! There's no cost to you. Just register your club card or debit/credit cards and use Mt. Diablo Audubon Society Group Number 500003063.

NEWS FROM WILD BIRDS UNLIMITED



◆ American and Lesser Goldfinches are present at the feeders, but not in their normal abundant numbers. After being seen in large numbers last year, Pine Siskins are almost non-existent in local backyards. This irruptive species is very nomadic and is not always seen in Northern California. Goldfinches and siskins love thistle and sunflower seeds and will readily use bird feeders.

◆ Dark-eyed Juncos have been quite abundant. We have also received many reports of Nuttall's Woodpeckers, Oak Titmice, and Chestnut-backed Chickadees visiting peanut and suet feeders. Flocks of American Robins and Cedar Waxwings are beginning to devour the toyon and pyracantha berries.

◆ Anna's Hummingbirds have already had their first nesting of the year. After mating, the male has nothing to do with the nest building and raising of the young. The female has the complete responsibility for rearing the young. She makes a nest out of lichen, lint, and downy plant fibers that is often held together with spider webs. The female usually lay two eggs and incubates them 14–19 days. She feeds nectar and insects to the young for 18–23 days in the nest. The young are fledged and on their own 1–2 weeks later.

◆ Chickadees and titmice are already starting to nest. It's not too late to put out birdhouses. Both of these species, along with woodpeckers, nuthatches, bluebirds, wrens, and others will readily use nesting boxes. Birdhouses should have drainage, ventilation, and cleanouts. These elements provide a safe, secure home for the birds. Also, depending upon the species you are trying to attract, specific hole sizes and floor dimensions are required.

◆ Large numbers of Northern Flickers are being reported. They will often be heard pounding on your house, trying to excavate a roosting cavity! They can be deterred with strips of Mylar or by putting up a flicker house.

Mike & Cecil Williams
Wild Birds Unlimited
 692 Contra Costa Blvd.
 Pleasant Hill, CA 94523
 925-798-0303

Visit us at www.wbupleasanthill.com



Five locations in San Diego County where California Gnatcatchers may be found. Clockwise from upper left: Lake Murray, Lower Otay Lake, Old Mission Dam at Mission Trails Regional Park, Lake Hodges. Inset, sea dahlia at San Elijo Lagoon.

California Gnatcatcher

Continued from page 8

mals and history. The gift shop offers authentic Kumeyaay baskets, pottery and jewelry. Trails radiate from the center. Nearby is the Old Mission Dam built by the friars of Mission San Diego de Alcalá, a National Historic Landmark. To reach the Visitor Center, take I-8 east to Fairmount and go north on Mission Gorge Road for 4.2 miles; turn left on Father Junipero Serra Trail.

Lake Murray, within the jurisdiction of the Mission Trails Park, is where Scott Streit photographed our featured bird. We are most fortunate for his permission to show one of the most pleasing photos of the elusive Gnatcatcher. Lake Murray is a popular urban reservoir, but it is also a productive site for birders. Other species to look for are Costa's Hummingbird, Cassin's Kingbird, Wrentit, Blue Grosbeak, Cliff Swallow and California Thrasher, along with many ducks, grebes and other waterfowl. Scott's web site at www.bird-friends.com is well worth checking for more information about Lake Murray birds. From I-8, exit

at College Avenue and drive north about a mile to Navajo Road, go right another mile plus to Park Ridge Boulevard; right again to Golfcrest, and right to the playfields and parking.

Other San Diego County locations for California Gnatcatcher include San Elijo

Lagoon on the coast at Solana Beach, where there are about 20 pair; and Otay Lakes near the Mexican Border. Areas nearer the coast are

somewhat more densely populated than areas farther inland.

The California Gnatcatcher is listed as a "Threatened Species" under the Federal Endangered Species Act, and a "Species of Special Concern" by the California Department of Fish and Game. The birds prefer habitat consisting of coastal sage scrub dominated by sagebrush and buckwheat. These are the primary plants used by the insects on which the gnatcatcher feeds. The conservation goal is to protect and conserve coastal sage scrub habitat. A large percentage of this habitat has been lost to urbanization.

"The gnatcatcher is also one of the richest California residents. These 2,600 pairs of birds control more than 513,000 acres of Southern California prime real estate. That equates to more than 200 acres of ground per couple! Assuming you could buy an acre of ground in Southern California for \$100,000, each pair of birds is worth more than \$20,000,000!"

Steve Doyle, California Building Industry Association

a



Western Tanager *Piranga ludoviciana*

The adult male Western Tanager is easily identified by his bright red face, with a yellow neck, shoulder, and underparts. He sports a black back and tail, and black wings with a white and a yellow wing bar. The females and immature males have gray or olive-gray where the adult male is black, and they lack the red coloration. As mentioned, the birds acquire their blush over time from their diet of fruits rich in rhodoxanthin, such as honeysuckle berries.

Western tanagers are home in western North America. They breed from as far north as Nunavut south to southern Arizona and New Mexico. But when snows come, they travel to the warmer climes of Mexico and Costa Rica. They prefer coniferous forests of Douglas fir, spruce or pine, where they will build a nest on a low, horizontal branch.

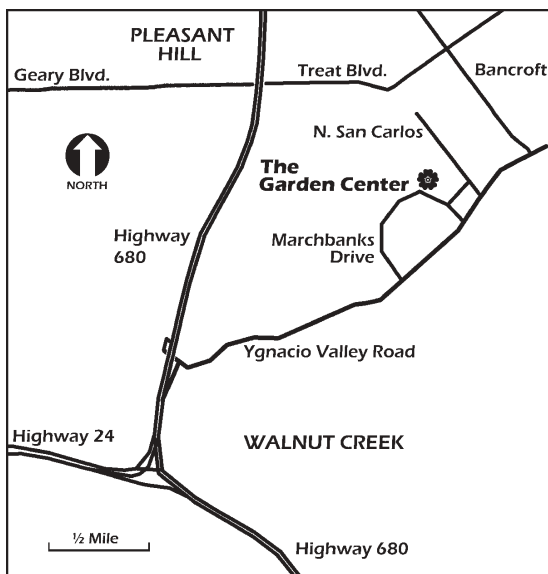
During springtime, their diet is insects, and as the seasons change, they opt for fruit, such as the cherries of the orchards. They may come to feeders for fruit.

In the nineteenth century, the Louisiana Territory stretched to the Pacific Ocean, and the bird was known as the Louisiana Tanager. In fact, the species name *ludoviciana* is derived from "Louisiana." That name was given by the ornithologist Alexander Wilson to the bird discovered by the Lewis and Clark expedition. Today the Western Tanager would hit the rare bird alert list if it were to be seen in Louisiana.

MOUNT DIABLO AUDUBON SOCIETY MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION

Family membership in Mt. Diablo Audubon is \$25 for one year. Membership in National Audubon Society is an additional \$20 for new NAS members (or \$35 for returning members). MDAS members receive 10 issues of *The Quail*; National Audubon Society members also receive four quarterly issues of the *Audubon Magazine*.

Mail check or credit card information to MDAS Membership, 400 Oneida Court, Orinda, CA 94526. Membership Chair is Ann McGregor, 925-968-1677.



Mount Diablo Audubon Society meets on the first Thursday of each month, except July and August. Everyone is invited.

Driving directions:

From Walnut Creek, take Ygnacio Valley Road to the signal at Marchbanks Drive. Go left and follow Marchbanks to the Garden Center, opposite the Greenery Restaurant. Turn left into the parking lot.

From Highway 680 south, take Treat Blvd. to Bancroft. Go right to Ygnacio Valley Road, turn right and go one block past signal at N. San Carlos Dr. (Heather Farm entrance). At Marchbanks Drive turn right. The Garden Center is located on the right in the second block.

the Quail

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Mount Diablo Audubon Society

• a nonprofit organization dedicated to habitat conservation and environmental education •
P.O. Box 53 • Walnut Creek, CA 94597-0053
(925) AUD-UBON • (925) 283-8266

Mount Diablo Audubon Society general meetings are on the first Thursday of every month except July and August in the Camellia Room of the Garden Center at Heather Farms, 1540 Marchbanks Drive, Walnut Creek. Board of Directors meets at 7 PM on the second Thursday of every month in the conference room of Wild Birds Unlimited, 692 Contra Costa Boulevard, Pleasant Hill. All members are welcome and encouraged to attend.

Questions about membership or mailing addresses? Call Ann McGregor, Membership Chair, at (925) 968-1677. MDAS membership includes 10 issues of the Quail. A 1-year family membership in MDAS is \$25/year or \$500 for lifetime membership (payable in two \$250 annual payments). National Audubon Society membership includes the Audubon magazine. Introductory 1-year membership is \$20 or \$30 for 2 years; membership renewal is \$35/year. To join MDAS or NAS, send a check payable to MDAS to Ann McGregor, Membership Chair, 400 Oneida Ct., Danville, 94526. SEND ADDRESS CHANGES for both NAS and MDAS to P.O. Box 53, Walnut Creek, CA 94597-0053. Please send exchange bulletins for MDAS to the editor, 215 Calle La Mesa, Moraga, CA 94556.

MDAS Board of Directors

President: Mike Williams, 376-1631
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California Gnatcatcher • Polioptila californica
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Quickies

Weekend Birding in California

In Search of the California Gnatcatcher

One of the exciting aspects of being a birder is the adventure of seeing a species you have never seen before, and, as the British say, ticking it on your life list. The adventure is the more exciting with the rarity of the bird. That is why, for example, in January there were dozens of cars lined up along a rural road in Solano County opposite a broad field where cattle grazed. They were watching a Snowy Owl, a mere white speck that looked as if it might be a plastic sack stuck on a fence beyond the cows. This was the first time in over 30 years that this Owl had come so far south from its normal habitat, and people were indeed jubilant at the sighting.

It's not likely, though, that if you want to tick the California Gnatcatcher, you will find it by waiting in Northern California—even for 30 years—for one to

appear. These tiny, gray-and-black songbirds are nonmigratory and enjoy the coastal sage scrub of Southern California and Baja. They can be found only in the counties of Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino and San Diego. And even there, only a relatively few pairs prevail, and your quest may be trying. Although they are resident, the choice time to hunt for them would be during breeding season when the males are more vocal, and the sound of a kitten mewing from a small bush will beckon you to carefully scan the scene.

Gnatcatchers build their nests in shrubs, and will lay their first batch of 2–5 eggs in late March. They may have as many as three broods during the spring nesting season, which may last until early July. First-year birds generally establish territories within two miles of the nest by October, so that winter distribution is not appreciably different from the breeding season.

California Gnatcatchers may be found at many locations near the San Diego County coast. The area around Lake

Hodges had the highest daily count recorded for the San Diego County Bird Atlas at 36. From I-15 south of Escondido, exit at Pomerado Road and take West Bernardo Drive for about half a mile to the Joslyn Senior Center. Park here and take the trails to the lake. This is a fine birding spot where you might also observe Western and Clark's Grebes, the coastal race of Cactus Wren, White-tailed Kite, Osprey, Golden Eagle, Sage Sparrow, and Spotted Sandpiper. Blue-gray Gnatcatchers are here, too, so look for the darker underside and nearly all black tail, and for the black cap of the breeding male California Gnatcatcher.

Mission Trails Regional Park Visitor and Interpretive Center is a good place to search for our objective. Gnatcatchers are often seen from the upper parking lot, and you will certainly hear them, for as you approach the front entrance to the building, recordings of their song and of other local bird songs greet you along the walk. The center has interesting exhibits on the park's geology, plants, ani-

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