



Mt. Diablo Audubon Society

The Quail

VOL. 65 No. 4

DEC 2019–JAN 2020

Next Meeting: Thursday, December 12

Note that this date is one week later than usual!!

The Mt. Diablo Audubon Society will meet **Thursday, December 12**, in the Camelia Room of **The Gardens at Heather Farm**, 1540 Marchbanks Drive, Walnut Creek.

6:30 PM Doors Open

7:00 PM Birding Info: *Gorillas on the Mountain*

7:25 PM News

7:40 PM Snacks* and Raffle

8:00 PM Main Program: *Kenya: A Birding and Wildlife Frontier*

**as a conservation organization we encourage you to bring your own mug for coffee or tea*

8:00 PM Main Program:

Kenya: A Birding and Wildlife Frontier

Jill Hedgecock



What is it like to touch extinction? Admire nature's ingenuity in a parrot's coloration? Marvel at the oddest-looking raptor on the planet? Watch vultures swoop in on the remains of a lion kill?

The fact that Kenya is home to the last two Northern White Rhino and one of the largest populations of Black Rhino is what initially drew Jill Hedgecock to visit Kenya. But its wealth of birdlife

was a big attraction, too. Kenya is home to 1,100 species of birds — nearly half of the 2,341 bird species found in Africa.

It supports the second largest variety of birdlife in Africa, second only to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Kenya's national animals include the lion, which represents strength, and the rooster which is a symbol of a new and prosperous life. The Lilac-breasted Roller is the official country bird of Kenya.

Kenya's natural resources provided *National Geographic* moment after *National Geographic* moment. Jill's breath caught while watching a lion pick up its cub in the manner of a housecat moving its kitten. Her heart melted as she observed two cheetah siblings grooming each other. Then there was the laugh-out-loud moment of a juvenile giraffe kicking up his heels. Another highlight was witnessing hundreds of wildebeest cross a crocodile-infested river. But perhaps her best memory was when her thrill turned to fear as a leopard walked underneath Jill's safari vehicle — an incident captured on video that will be shared during her talk.



Jill Hedgecock's long-standing roots run deep with the Mt. Diablo Audubon Society, serving as the International Conservation Coordinator in the early 1990s, as a leader of the Black Diamond Mine Christmas Bird Count circle for many years, and as a reporter covering the Christmas Bird Count for the last two years. She has a master's degree in Environmental Management from the University of San Francisco. Her novel about a seventeen-year-old girl on safari who finds herself at odds with rhino poachers will be available for purchase at the meeting. To learn more about Jill's books visit www.jillhedgecock.com.

7:00 PM Birding Info: ***Gorillas on the Mountain***

Jill Hedgecock



Did you know that gorillas share over 99% of their DNA with humans? Learn about these knuckle-walking great apes as Jill Hedgecock shares her amazing experiences while visiting with the Mountain Gorillas in Rwanda.

Photos: Jill Hedgecock

*The Quail will be taking the month of January off, and will resume in February. Make sure to make a note of January's member meeting information **below**.*

Presidents' Letter

Maren Smith & Ariana Rickard, *MDAS Co-Presidents*

The winter holiday season is upon us and that means a variety of shorebirds will grace the bay, rafts of ducks and geese will noisily gather in nearby National Wildlife Refuges, and squadrons of Sandhill Cranes will fly in to roost in the flooded fields of the Delta, all of them wowing us with a miraculous wildlife spectacle.



It's also the season when many members are chasing rare migrants, adding birds to their Birding Life Lists, while others will be participating in the longest-running community science project on the planet, the **National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count** (CBC) in its 120th year.

It all began in 1900 when Frank Chapman, an ornithologist at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City and an officer of the newly formed Audubon Society, proposed the count as an alternative to the then-common Christmas Day tradition of "side hunts," shooting birds to compete for the most birds killed.

Chapman proposed counting birds vs. killing birds, then submitting that data to the magazine, *Bird-Lore*, precursor of *Audubon Magazine*. Trading in their guns for binoculars, that first count held on Christmas Day of 1900 included 27 volunteers in 25 locations across the U.S. and Canada resulting in 90 species seen. Last year, 2,585 CBC counts were submitted and 76,987 participants counted. Highs came from reigning champion Matagorda County-Mad Island Marsh, Texas in the United States at 220 species (in their 25th year running!), and Yanayacu, Napo, Ecuador in Latin America at 502 species. For more information, see **[Audubon.org](https://www.audubon.org)**.

Our chapter has two 15-mile-diameter county circles. The Central Contra Costa County CBC will be held on Saturday, December 14 with East County on Wednesday, December 18. Everyone is welcome to join this important, fun

community science event. See **CBC Coordinator Elizabeth Leite's article** for more information about our chapter's event.

There are several MDAS field trips scheduled that promise views of wintering ducks, geese, swans, cranes and raptors, further afield, as well as shorebirds closer to home. You do not want to miss the winter nature show. Check www.mtdiabloaudubon.org to peruse the field trip page and calendar (**Birding, Field Trips**), and sign up to find out where rare and returning birds are being seen in the area (**Birding, East Bay Birding Email Groups**).

Also, closer to home, take the time to check out the newly renovated **Moorhen Marsh**, part of Mt. View Sanitary District (MVSD), now back, better than ever! There are new interpretive signs, nest boxes, viewing platforms, and bridges throughout the 21-acre wetland property (treated wastewater effluent). You are pretty much guaranteed to see a Green Heron and a Black Phoebe on your ramble, but you might get lucky and also get a glimpse of a beaver or otters. Be sure to see **Kelly Davidson's MVSD article** in this edition of the *Quail*. To visit, register at the MVSD office first, then enjoy this oasis in the midst of nearby oil tanks open Monday–Thursday from 7:00 AM–4:30 PM and Friday from 7:00 AM–3:30 PM.

In other chapter news:

- We are thrilled to partner with Julie Woodruff in her six-week Northern Saw-whet Owl banding project. Several members have had the opportunity to observe banding and to help administer the project. Julie will speak about her project and ongoing research in April 2020, but until then, you can **read a bit more about her project** in this *Quail* newsletter.
- Three MDAS Education Committee classes took place this fall providing birders with an opportunity to expand their knowledge of migrants and vagrants, raptors, and to learn more about another community science project, **iNaturalist**.
- Progress has been made on the installation of “No Fishing” signs at Heather Farm Park’s natural lake in Walnut Creek, and we are working on more interpretive bird posters that will be installed in WC Open Space kiosks in 2020. See **Rosalie Howarth's article** in this issue of *The Quail* newsletter.
- Our **Young Birders Club** has an active membership with interesting field trips each month. They will also cover Heather Farm and Howe Homestead Parks for the CBC in December. Parents, grandparents, and friends of people with kids ages 9–17, spread the word!
- For Social Media, MDAS has a new Instagram account (**diabloaudubon**), so if you are a social media buff, check us out and “follow” us. Field trip reports and photos are now found on the **Mt. Diablo Audubon Facebook**

page which you can link to from the MDAS website Home Page (www.mtdiabloaudubon.org).

With the recent **dire news** about the 30% decline in birds since 1970, it can be a little disheartening for those of us who love birds. However, check out seven ideas you can enact right now to take action (www.3billionbirds.org), including ways to reduce window strikes, plant native gardens, avoid pesticides in your yard, and embrace community science projects (like the **CBC**, **eBird**, **FeederWatch**, and **iNaturalist**).

To quote Edward Everett Hale, "*I am only one; but still I am one. I cannot do everything; but still I can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.*"

This holiday season enjoy gatherings with your families and friends, the winter birds in the field or at backyard feeders, and our many chapter activities. Maybe we'll get some rainy days so that we can hunker down indoors with time to dust off the covers of the birding book stack and savor a cup of hot cocoa with plenty of marshmallows as we read, reflect, and recharge, with an eye on resolutions for the year ahead.

Cheers, Ariana Rickard and Maren Smith, Co-Presidents MDAS

January Meeting: Thursday, January 2, 2020

The Mt. Diablo Audubon Society will meet **Thursday, January 2**, in the Camelia Room of **The Gardens at Heather Farm**, 1540 Marchbanks Drive, Walnut Creek.

6:30 PM Doors Open

7:00 PM Birding Info: *Highlights of the 2019 Christmas Bird Count*

7:25 PM News

7:40 PM Snacks* and Raffle

8:00 PM Main Program: *Feathers and Flight: A Journey to the New World Tropics*

**as a conservation organization we encourage you to bring your own mug for coffee or tea*

8:00 PM Main Program:
Feathers and Flight: A Journey to the New World Tropics



International bird guide, naturalist and wildlife photographer, Benny Jacobs-Schwartz will share his dazzling bird photos, captivating videos, and animated storytelling to bring a slice of the tropics to California.

Touching on topics of migration, speciation, and biodiversity, this media-rich journey will share some of the fascinating and unique birds that inhabit the new-world tropics. Sure to both educate and entertain, this presentation will leave you with a deeper understanding of tropical ecology, and knowledge about where some of our backyard birds spend their winters!

Benny Isaac Jacobs-Schwartz owns and operates a bird-guiding business and lifestyle brand called **BIRDS by BIJS** (pronounced Bee-jus). Working seasonally as a naturalist guide, expedition trip leader, and international bird guide, Benny works in a variety of locations. Most recently bringing him to such exotic places like coastal Alaska, Trinidad and Tobago, and the Ecuadorian cloud forest.



When not trip-leading or following birds across the world, he is at home growing his business, initially begun in response to many requests for urban birding outings. His business has now grown to encompass a nature inspired clothing line, bird photography and wildlife documentaries, and, of course, local and international bird watching tours.



Seasonally, Benny or BIJS, is based in Los Angeles, where he leads public and private birding adventures to urban hotspots. He is also a passionate photographer, specializing in birds. He uses his impressive collection of content to leverage his prolific **social media presence**. Benny hopes his love of the natural world will inspire others to conserve the open spaces around them and look up more often from their phones!

Photos: Benny Jacobs-Schwartz

7:00 PM Birding Info:
Highlights of the 2019 Christmas Bird Count

Jerry Britten

Mt. Diablo Audubon Society Vice-President Jerry Britten will report highlights of the 2019 Christmas Bird Counts.

Welcome, New Members!

Rosanna Arndt, Concord; **Michael Strom**, Walnut Creek

Upcoming Field Trips

Saturday, December 7, 7:00 AM

Sacramento Wildlife Refuges

Leader: Beth Branthaver

This full-day field trip will include visits to several wonderful wildlife refuges in the Sacramento Valley, highlighting Sacramento and Colusa NWRs. Collectively these sanctuaries are home to tens of thousands of wintering ducks, geese and swans. Carpool leaves Sunvalley Mall at 7:00 AM, or meet the group at 8:15 AM at the I-5 N Dunnigan rest area. For the latter, take I-680 N, cross the Benicia Bridge, merge onto I-80 E at Cordelia. At Vacaville, merge onto I-505 N, follow for 34 miles and merge onto I-5 N just south of Dunnigan. Continue past the town to the rest stop. The exact itinerary is to be announced the day of the trip. Bring a radio if you have one. Leader: Beth Branthaver, 510-502-4869.

Category 2

Thursday, December 12, 7:15 AM–3:00 PM

American Canyon Wetlands Edge Park

Leaders: Chris & Teri Wills

Wintering ducks, shorebirds and raptors possible along the wetlands and the Napa River; some passerines in the fields and eucalyptus. We will walk 3–4 miles on level paths along ponds and reach the Napa River before returning to the park. High tide is at noon. Bring walking shoes, trail snacks and water; lunch in the park when we return. Carpool leaves Sunvalley at 7:15 AM, meet at park at 8:00 AM. Take I-680 N to Benicia, I-780 W to Vallejo, I-80 E to Hwy 37 W (Exit 33). Exit at CA 29/Sonoma Blvd toward Napa. After 1.5 miles turn left on W American Canyon Road, at end turn right on Wetlands Edge Road. Turn left on Eucalyptus Drive and into parking lot. Leaders: Chris & Teri Wills, 925-408-5364.

Saturday, December 14, 7:00 AM

Central Contra Costa County Christmas Bird Count

Leader: Jerry Britten

Hold the date for the Central Contra Costa County Christmas Bird Count, a tradition going back to 1955! Species and total numbers of birds within this **count circle** will be censused. To participate in field trips led by experienced birders on this special occasion, or to tally birds at your yard/feeder if you live within the count circle, contact one of the organizers below. For more details please visit the **MDAS CBC page**.

Wednesday, December 18, 7:00 AM–7:00 PM

East Contra Costa County Christmas Bird Count

Hold the date for the 20th annual East Contra Costa County Christmas Bird Count! Species and total numbers of birds within this **count circle** will be censused. To participate in field trips led by experienced birders on this special occasion, or to tally birds at your yard/feeder if you live within the count circle, contact one of the organizers below. For more details please visit the **MDAS CBC page**.

Saturday, December 28, 7:15 AM–3:00 PM

Southeast Solano County Raptors and More

Leader: Gary Fregien

We will search the grasslands of southeast Solano County for raptors and other birds not common south of the Sacramento River channel, including Rough-Legged Hawk and the elusive Mountain Plover. Carpool leaves Sunvalley at 7:15 AM. Or, meet the leader at 8:00 AM at Suisun City McDonald's. Take I-680 N, cross bridge to Benicia and merge to I-80 E at Cordelia. Then take Hwy 12 E toward Rio Vista for approximately 4 miles to Sunset Avenue, where you will make a left turn at the signal light into the shopping center. The McDonald's is on the right. We will bird east on Hwy 12 and Creed Road to the vicinity of Hwy 113 and Robinson Road, possibly including Jepson Prairie. We will make several stops, looking for migrating waterfowl, passerines and winter raptors, especially Flannery and McCormack Roads in search of the elusive Mountain Plover. From there, given time, we may travel to the Bird's Landing area, where we should see Tri-colored Blackbirds among other passerines and possibly to Montezuma Slough for waterfowl. Plan to spend 4–5 hours birding, plus driving time getting there and back. There will be minimal hiking, but dress for seasonal conditions. Bring along hand held radios, food, and water. Carpooling is strongly advised, due to limited access at stops and the distance traveled. Leader: Gary Fregien, 916-708-0636.

Saturday, January 4, 8:00 AM–4:00 PM

Putah Creek

Leader: Fred Safier

Putah Creek is usually reliable for Phainopepla, Lewis's Woodpecker, and Hooded Merganser, as well as possibly Barrow's Goldeneye. Carpool leaves Sunvalley Mall at 8:00 AM. Meet at 8:45 AM at the intersection of Cherry Glen and Pleasants Valley Roads, approximately 1 mile north from I-80, west of Vacaville. Dress warmly - this can be a cold, windy area. Bring lunch. Leader: Fred Safier, 925-937-2906.

Category 1

Friday, January 10, 8:00 AM–3:00 PM

High Tide at Lake Merritt & Arrowhead Marsh

Leader: Sandy Ritchie

We should find a good variety of wintering ducks and gulls at Lake Merritt. Then we will then drive to Arrowhead Marsh for the high tide around 11:15 AM; the rising tide should flush out rails. The area is also good for shorebirds and more wintering ducks on the estuary. A visit to Garretson Point will finish our trip. Carpool leaves at 8:00 AM from El Nido Ranch Road. Or, meet at 8:30 AM in parking lot by Lake Merritt. Take SR 24 to Oakland and I-980, take Grand Avenue exit and turn left on Grand. Enter park at Children's Fairyland (entry fee), and follow road around to parking lot entrance on right between boathouse and aviary. Bring lunch and drinks. Leader: Sandy Ritchie, 925-685-8048.

Category 1

Saturday, January 18, 7:30 AM–3:00 PM

Shollenberger Park/Ellis Creek, Petaluma

Leader: Sandy Ritchie

Both sites are good for wintering waders, shorebirds, waterfowl, and a few raptors. Carpool leaves Sunvalley Mall parking lot at 7:30 AM. Take I-680 across the Benicia Bridge. Go west on I-780 to I-80 towards Sacramento, exit to SR 37. Follow SR 37 to Lakeville Road, then turn right. Before reaching Petaluma, look for the water recycling facility on the left and turn left on South McDowell Blvd. After a short distance, turn left onto Cypress Drive. The Shollenberger access is behind the Point Blue offices on the right, Ellis Creek is farther along. We will decide which to visit first on the day of the trip. Bring lunch and a beverage. Leader: Sandy Ritchie, 925-685-8048.

Category 2

Wednesday, January 29, 9:00 AM–2:00 PM

Martinez Waterfront Birds

Leader: Tracy Farrington

We will visit several areas along the Martinez shoreline. Meet at 9:00 AM in the Waterbird Regional Preserve parking lot. From I-680, exit for Waterfront Road;

when driving north, this is the last exit before the Benicia Bridge. Go east about ½ mile and turn right onto Waterbird Way. Go around the corner to the left and then turn right into the parking lot. Bring lunch and a beverage. Leader: Tracy Farrington, 925-788-6223.

Category 2

To view all upcoming trips, see “Field Trips” under Birding at <http://www.mtdiabloaudubon.org>.

Field trips open to members and non-members, beginners to advanced birders. No dogs. Contact leader with questions. MDAS encourages carpooling (riders help with gas, tolls, or entry fees). Drivers who carpool should carry proof of liability insurance in their vehicles.

Category 1: Easy; little walking, smooth paths.

Category 2: Moderate; more than one mile, possibly rougher terrain.

Category 3: Difficult; extensive walking on rough terrain.

Watch Birds?—Help Science

Mike Eliot, *Member-at-Large*

Cornell Ornithology Lab needs you to count some birds. Every November they begin collecting data from community scientists, like you, on backyard bird populations and movements called Project FeederWatch. They do this by collecting data from thousands of “feederwatchers” from November to April all over the US and Canada. Participation is easy enough for kids, mainly just counting birds that come to your backyard feeders for just a couple of hours over two days each week. It can be a fun family project and everyone can feel proud that they are helping the birds.



To join, you need to go to the **FeederWatch website**. The cost is \$15 for Cornell members or \$18 for non-members, which is the major source of funding for the project for a year. In about three weeks you will receive a research kit with complete instructions. You can collect data beginning the week of November 9 and put them into the database after you get your kit. Everything is uploaded onto the Feederwatch website. The following fall, you will receive their

report “Winter Bird Highlights” and the Cornell Lab newsletter.

The project has a history dating to the mid-1970s in Ontario Canada, but was taken over after ten years by Long Point Bird Observatory and the Cornell Lab to go nationwide. The first year there were 4,000 participants. There are now over 20,000 in every state and in Canada.

The data collected provide a picture of the winter bird populations throughout North America. They indicate how many individuals of each species are seen and measure changes in the winter ranges of species over time. This enables scientists to create population maps that detect gradual changes in wintering ranges and which species are at risk. Feederwatch is the only available method to produce such information.

Scientists make predictions of irruptions of finches and other species, as well as long-term trends of distribution and abundance. Kinds of foods and environmental factors, such as weather and climate change also help them determine bird movements and population changes. In addition, they can understand how disease is spread among backyard birds. The data are published in *Audubon Magazine* as well as major birding journals and magazines and distributed to news groups nationwide.

So, get outside and enjoy the birds in your yard. Your data may help us find causes for their dwindling populations while you have an educational family adventure.

Moorhen Marsh Is Back and Better than Ever!

Kelly Davidson, *District Biologist, Mt. View Sanitary District*

Created 45 years ago, **Moorhen Marsh** was the first wetland on the West Coast to use treated wastewater (effluent) as its primary water source. As part of the treatment process, **Mt. View Sanitary District** (MVSD or the District) uses the wetland's natural capacity to reduce ammonia as the effluent travels its 7-day route through Moorhen Marsh to Peyton Slough.

The 21-acre wetland, though, wasn't originally built to treat wastewater. In 1974, Moorhen Marsh was designed solely to provide habitat for fish and wildlife species when many natural wetlands in California were being lost to agriculture and urban development. Over the decades, the site has become important habitat for many sensitive species, including Green Heron, Black-crowned Night-Heron, San Francisco Common Yellowthroat, North American River Otter, and Western Pond Turtle — the state's only native freshwater turtle and designated as a "**species of special concern**" by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

As the owner and operator of Moorhen Marsh, MVSD is committed to maintaining the environmental benefit the site provides to both wildlife and our Martinez community. In 2012, the District set out to determine the maintenance activities and habitat enhancements needed to enable the site to continue delivering the functions and values it was built to provide in the 1970s. In 2013, the **Moorhen Marsh Management Plan** was completed — a 55-page document that culminated in the **Moorhen Marsh Western Pond Turtle Habitat Enhancement Project** (Enhancement Project).

The Enhancement Project required a two-year closure of the marsh to the public between January 2017 and February 2019 while the newly enhanced wetland and riparian habitats

and visitor amenities were constructed. Though it was a long two years, we think the new ADA-accessible trail, boardwalk and viewing platform, upgraded dip-netting areas for students participating in the **Wetlands Field Trip Program**, ten new interpretive panels, two new picnic areas and over 1800 newly planted native trees and shrubs were worth the wait!

MVSD is extremely proud of the newly enhanced Moorhen Marsh, and we encourage Mt. Diablo Audubon Society members to explore the site multiple times in the next few years to observe the changes in vegetation and avian populations over time. If you visit and have observations to share or questions about the project, please contact Kelly Davidson at kdavidson@mvsd.org.



Map of Moorhen Marsh

Northern Saw-whet Owl Banding in Contra Costa County

Julie Woodruff, *Biologist, Northern Saw-whet Owl Project and Banding Program*

This year, we marked the second season of Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*) banding occurring within Contra Costa County, located in Las Trampas Regional Wilderness. In 2019, I partnered with MDAS to create a volunteer opportunity and potential field trip experience for small groups for years to come. Why do we care about Northern



Saw-whet Owls? Well, for one, they are the most commonly banded bird in North America, yet few people have the opportunity to see them due to their diminutive size and secretive nature.

This species migrates in the fall from their breeding territories at high elevation and latitudes to overwinter in milder climates, including the Bay Area. This project's goal is to document the general numbers of migrant Saw-whet Owls in the area and determine annual variations through long-term monitoring. The project runs from mid-October through mid-November annually, and is replicated across dozens of other banding sites, all operating under the unified goal of **Project OwlNet**. Want to get involved or schedule a small group (six or fewer) outing for 2020? Please contact the Project Coordinator Julie Woodruff at juliewoodruff15@gmail.com.

Photo: Julie Woodruff

Christmas Bird Count Expanding

Elizabeth Leite, *Christmas Bird Count (CBC) Chair*

Members and friends of MDAS will be out spotting, identifying, and counting birds in the Central County on December 14th as part of the annual Christmas Bird Count. Our chapter has been doing this since 1956 when members described a Count Circle basically centered on our mountain and organized their first Count. Most surveys concentrated on wildlands back then except when feeder watchers were contributing from their own backyards.

Jerry Britten and I (we are Co-Compilers) have wanted to expand our survey areas to include some new ground in the hopes of finding more birds. Jerry has seen community parks as possibly rich sites. This year we'll have coverage at Clayton Community Park and various local parks in Concord and the Markham Nature Center. Last year we picked up a park in Pleasant Hill and the year before, our Briones team began birding three Martinez parks as part of their survey. If any of these parks existed in 1956 I doubt they had the mature trees to host visiting birds. Now they are simply part of our local Green Belt—a place for birds to rest and eat. The park on Withers in Pleasant Hill provided a Townsend's Warbler last year. Buchanan Park in Pittsburg is a reliable source of Orange-crowned Warblers and the Clayton park frequently has Phainopepla present. It will be interesting to see what these tamer parks contribute to our overall numbers this year.

Last year we began coverage of the more southerly portion of our Count circle for the first time in many years when Southgate Road on Mt. Diablo was birded. This year's survey will include some of the group camp areas as well. Maybe there will be a thrasher there or an interesting sparrow. Additionally, we revived a survey on the Shell Ridge/Borges Ranch Open Space which we will continue to cover. Previously, it was included sporadically, depending upon available birders.

If you have a favorite local park or portion of Open Space—perhaps your “patch”—**let us know**. We may be able to include it in our CBC next year if we have adequate volunteers.

John Muir Land Trust's Campaign to Save Almond Ranch

Alan Bade, *Community Science*

In the November issue of *The Quail*, our Co-Presidents Maren and Ariana wrote about the meaningful partnerships that MDAS has formed with a number of like-minded conservation groups. We schedule partner hikes, conduct bird surveys, contribute to significant educational programs, and provide direct financial aid to sister organizations preserving important bird habitat, locally and internationally. As an MDAS member, I'm deeply proud of these efforts!

Some of these organizations have made significant contributions to the preservation of critical open space and bird habitat that we all enjoy. As we all know, **Save Mount Diablo** and the **John Muir Land Trust** (JMLT) have been local leaders in this effort. I'd like to take a moment to highlight a major campaign by JMLT that is reaching a year-end fundraising deadline: **Almond Ranch**, 281 acres along Franklin Ridge in Martinez. It is a keystone property that is in danger of development.



Photo: Adam Weidenbach

Almond Ranch sits between Mount Wanda (part of the John Muir National Historic Site) to the east, and Sky Ranch to the west. Both of these are previous JMLT acquisitions, along with Dutra Ranch, Gustin Ranch, West Hills Farm, and Stonehurst. It is the "missing link" that will connect all of these properties together into a cohesive whole. All of this is fabulous bird and wildlife habitat and is criss-crossed with great hiking trails.

Mount Wanda is a local favorite **birding spot** of mine, with ridge-top grasslands, sweeping views, oak woodlands, and great birds! Someday, I hope to be able to hike right on past its western border into Almond Ranch along Franklin Ridge and beyond. JMLT's efforts to save Almond Ranch are worthy of our support!

For information on how to help this over the finish line, please see JMLT's **website**.

"No Fishing" Signs Installed at Heather Farm Nature Lake

Rosalie Howarth, *Publicity and Social Media Chair*

In order to protect waterfowl from tangled fishing line, the city of Walnut Creek, in response to repeated MDAS requests, has installed new "No Fishing" signs at six locations around Heather Farm Nature Lake. Most have an Area number in the lower left corner. When reporting illegal fishers to WCPD at 925-935-6400, give dispatch the number on the sign to aid the police in quickly locating the offenders. Fishing, however, is allowed in the Casting Pond (with the fountains) near the Community Center. It is stocked twice a year. The Police Department asks that we do NOT interact with offenders, just leave the area and report. Hopefully this will reduce the amount of treacherous fishing line snagged underwater, and in trees around the lake.



Photo: Rosalie Howarth

Events

Project FeederWatch

Saturday, November 9, 2019–April 3, 2020

Consider joining the Cornell Lab's Project FeederWatch this year. You'll probably get hooked. This year's season begins on November 9, and runs for 21 weeks to April 3, 2020. To receive your kit in time, sign up now at feederwatch.org.

Central County Christmas Bird Count

Saturday, December 14, 2019

East County Christmas Bird Count

Wednesday, December 18, 2019

Mark your calendars: This year's Central County Christmas Bird Count will take place Saturday, December 14. The East County Christmas Bird Count will follow on Wednesday, December 18. Previous participants who plan to come out again this year should contact CBC Chair Elizabeth Leite: cbc@mtdiabloaudubon.org. If you are new to Mt. Diablo Audubon Society and interested in participating, start by checking out [National Audubon's Christmas Bird Count](#).

Notes from New England: A Change of Seasons

Douglas Chickering

Newburyport, Massachusetts

For the most part the seasons seem to change slowly, almost imperceptively. At least here in middle New England. The spring replaces winter maddeningly slowly. The days warm up, the snow slowly melts away, and we look for those harbingers of spring. Look! There is a Killdeer. Is it spring yet? Yet the nights are still freezing and the daytime cold. The Snowy Owl is gone, we see Kestrels soaring by the platform at parking lot 1 on Plum island. Is it spring yet? Where are the warblers?

The same is true with the transition from spring to summer. Is it when the dowitchers first arrive or with the first bite of a greenhead? It is all so unclear. The leaves in the trees slowly appear heavy and the first blush of color is noticed. Is that autumn on its way or is it already here? In some ways nature likes to sneak up on us. Yet, there is one exception. The change from fall to winter is abrupt, surprising and often disruptive. Here in New England there always seems to be a brutal storm around Halloween. High winds, some damage, a little loss of electricity and then, when it's over— it's winter.

The foliage in the trees and underbrush are gone. The colors of nature have been reduced to the bright red of Winterberry and Bittersweet. There is still some faded yellow at the edges but mostly it is stark, gray and brown. Just waiting for the first snowfall. And to accentuate the disorientation we change our clocks and seemingly shorten the day. Even though we don't really shorten the day it clearly seems that way. This abrupt and confusing change might cast a pall on our lives if it weren't for the birds. They are different and fewer but no less magnificent.

Just yesterday I was walking the Hellcat trail looking for well, for anything that might show up. Looking, primarily for passerines. I came across many robins and myrtles. A few resident woodpeckers, two Hermit Thrushes that may, or may not, winter over, and a catbird. Pretty tame stuff. Then I saw a flicker of movement low and off to my left. Two birds were foraging among the bare branches of trees and brush at the edge of the path and they were making their way towards me. Maybe a chat, I thought, or another rarity. November can be good for rarities. Then I got on one and then the other.



Golden-crowned Kinglet

Photo: Ryan Schain/Macaulay Library at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology (ML41866011)

Not a surprise, and not a rarity. But it was one of those serene and beautiful moments that is both quiet and exhilarating. Two Golden-crowned Kinglets appeared right next to me. The binoculars were superfluous, and I found myself just standing there still, silent and watching. They hopped from twig to branch to twig in quick expert leaps; occasionally emitting a little squeak. They were stunningly beautiful. These tiny packets of energy; oblivious to my presence and weaving a magic spell of activity about me. I have experienced this before with a Golden-crowned Kinglet as with other small passerines and it never gets old. Thank God I still have the childlike wonder in my heart, that I can still thrill to this short but magical moment.

The experience was both ordinary and unique as they paused, pirouetted, and looked around in what seemed to be an endless space of time and it was over all too soon. Sometimes I believe that it is these little common but special events that are the essence of the joy of birding.

Douglas Chickering is the brother of MDAS Member Chick Chickering

December Gallery



Alejandro Rico-Guevara giving a fascinating presentation on hummingbirds' energetics and weapons at the MDAS October meeting. Photo: Marc Desin



Young Birders Club field trip to Heather Farm Park in Walnut Creek. Photo: Maren Smith



Field trip for the iNaturalist Education Committee class taught by Kendall Oei in Pine Canyon (part of Castle Rock and Diablo Foothills Regional Parks in Walnut Creek). Photo: Maren Smith



Moorhen Marsh renovation. Photo: Maren Smith



Julie Woodruff banding Northern Saw-whet Owls.
Photo: Maren Smith



Julie Woodruff created patches for MDAS folks who had volunteered with the owl banding project!
Photo: Susana de Trapaga

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Mt. Diablo Audubon Society Leadership

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