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DS/23

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Sketches SAN DIEGO AUDUBON

FALL 2023 • VOLUME 75 • NUMBER 1

Celebrating 75 Years of Protecting Birds

Spark Birds, Nemesis Birds, *And Other Visitations Along the Trail*

You may search for years in vain, or have them fly right up to you, eye to eye. It's all part of the wondrous journey.

DS/23
Osprey

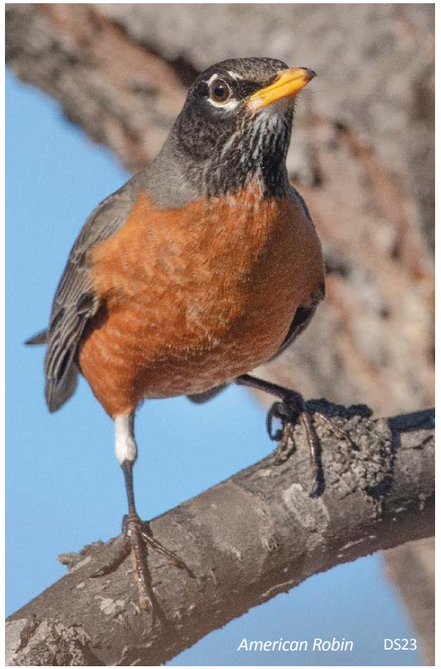
Spark Birds, Nemesis Birds,
And Other Visitations Along the Trail

by David Stump

It's personal.

There are an estimated 45 million birders actively patrolling America's wilder places, all searching for those memorable experiences that feed their appetites for discovery and engagement with living, free-flying birds. A viewing of a particular bird might last just a few moments, limited to a glimpse of blurred wings, or a faint call from a thicket. Sometimes the encounter will last much longer and give birders a feast for the eyes and ears—if they are patient enough to take it in. At the heart of things, perhaps for most of us, is a hunger for the wildness that birds seem to embody, even if they are simply noted with a glance while we wait at a traffic light, or briefly tracked as they glide over a crowded beach.

The words we use to name some of our defining experiences—*spark birds, nemesis birds,* and related birder slang such as *twitching*—can reveal our individuality while also undergirding our sense of being part of a birding community. A *spark bird* is a species that we credit with a personal threshold experience that got us hooked on birds. It involves a simple narrative, perhaps told in a short sentence, that is roughly equivalent to answering the question, "When did you first realize you were in love?" You'll find a good sampling of some real-life examples on pages 4 through 7.



American Robin DS23

The *nemesis bird* is a little trickier, but not as dark as it may sound. If you have a species that you've set your mind on observing, and perhaps made multiple trips to find and have been skunked every time, that's your nemesis bird. You may, if you have a high pain threshold, list several of them. Whereas the spark bird is safely nestled among our warmest bird memories, perhaps to be embellished with fresh details over time, the nemesis may molt its vexing status in a moment of "There! Right in front of us!" Not a bookend to the spark bird, the nemesis is a reminder that the birding horizon constantly advances before us. We always have more to see and learn.

What are *twitchers*? They are birders who will drop nearly anything, on a moment's notice, to race to see a rare or accidental species when an eBird alert goes out. This obsession may result in some serious travel time, and perhaps stress in the workplace or on the home front. But think of the emotional high when they find their quarry! A single Kirtland's Warbler found its way to New York's Central Park, and scores of avid twitchers—including the celebrated Black birder Christian Cooper—flocked there for a viewing.

These monikers speak to personal experience. For a birder to continue to tackle challenges and to develop higher skill levels, it must be personal. At heart, our individual birding journeys involve a search for our unique rewilding encounters—for connecting with nature in deeper and more meaningful ways by bringing wild birds into our daily experience.

A Quest for Beauty

Art imitates nature but is always surpassed by the original. Hunting for beauty is one way to describe birding. The aesthetics of birding are discovered in natural compositions of light, color, atmosphere, organic shapes, and other elements a painter might strive to capture, with a bird or birds being the central subject. Imagine (or Google) any bird painting by Robert Bateman, once voted to be the greatest wildlife artist ever. We learn to take it all in, perhaps subconsciously, and wait for those moments when the elements snap into place—when the picture is made whole. One of America's most beloved photographers of nature, Ansel Adams, recounted the story of the making of one of his most famous images: *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico*. He had been working all day in the mountains among the aspens looking for a good composition and felt defeated. Always alert to what was taking shape around him, he nearly ditched his pickup when he saw a perfect image emerge off to the side of the road. He raced to set up his 8″ x 10″ view camera, made a quick mental calculation on the exposure, and was able to capture a single exposure moments before the light slipped behind the hill. An original print may run you $700,000. Expect beauty and you might find it right in front of you. Your value: not for sale.

Liveliness and Aliveness

Birds are exquisitely designed and gloriously adorned for the worlds they inhabit. When we are given a front-row seat to nature playing out its various avian dramas, we are called to rapt attention. Our eyes widen as the action, however brief, unfolds before us. We know what we see is part of the dance of life, life as it has been lived for countless millennia. We see this in the flitting, hyper movements of a songbird, in the gliding stalk of a heron, in the dignity and sense of freedom of a soaring raptor. We also witness it in 4K nature documentaries, usually in slow motion. But we're spoiled by this sophisticated digital imagery, and sometimes forget to keep observing, to look and to keep looking. Take in the flowing narratives of wildness as you study animals as sensate, animated creatures. The little bundles of feathers and hollow bones we call birds are condensations of 'aliveness' that are more potent than any energy drink.

With a Bird's Eye

Binoculars and telephoto lenses compress the depth of field, flattening the image we see and creating very shallow focus. That is both good and bad—good when we can separate our subject from a diffuse background and take in remarkable detail, and bad when we are unable to apprehend the larger scene. If opportunity allows, it may be worth the effort to view a bird from a multiplicity of perspectives, or at least try to imagine its point of view. Remember birds have an extraordinary range of vision. Many species having a virtual 360-degree field of view, with the trade-off of limited binocular (overlapping) vision which in some species is less than 20 degrees. Humans have a stationary horizontal field of view of about 210 degrees, with a binocular range of roughly 115 degrees.

An additional consideration: A bird's eyes are fixed in their sockets. It must turn its head to change its zone of sharp focus. That's where its incredibly supple neck comes into play. Visual acuity is important to remember as well. An eagle's eyes may have five times the acuity ours do. Knowing what a bird is capable of seeing, and therefore aware of, is important for reading its behavior. For us as well as for birds, scanning (big picture) and focusing (small picture) are both critical to taking in what nature reveals. Birds don't use binoculars. Maybe we should lower the binos from time to time to see more of what the birds are watching.

Convergence

Birding can be viewed as a mostly benign form of hunting. Human vision, which in its three-dimensional, depth-of-field orientation, is not unlike that of raptors and mammalian predators. In three-point perspective, our vision is defined by convergence: Lines tracking on a given plane converging at a vanishing point—in this case, the targeted bird. These characteristics of vision facilitate our experience of engagement with our subject/quarry. We instinctively zero in on things that are attractive or important to us. We may achieve a convergence with the birds we watch, which amplifies our sense of connection

DS23 *Yellow-rumped Warbler*

with them. We may also experience a shiver of serendipity: We might find what we were seeking, and perhaps answers to questions we have been asking. These experiences offer us a payoff that gives us a buzz of discovery and joy in a successful 'hunt.'

Otherness and Oneness

In conversation with another member of our chapter a few years back, I remarked that I have always been drawn to the "otherness" of animals I encountered in the wild—that their wildness was a glimpse into something I could only connect with by letting language go silent. I needed to allow the reality of the creature before me to express itself in its own terms—terms I was actually glad I could not fully grasp. We seek both the knowable and the unknowable. My friend smiled and said for her it was the opposite: She felt a deep connection and sense of belonging, even of oneness, in such encounters. For me, both things are not only true but *necessarily* true. Every living creature, indeed, every particle, is irreducibly unique, yet part of the vast, almost infinitely complex web of all that is, including us. We delight in both the tantalizing specificity of every bird, its individual history, its DNA, and the species of larva it just swallowed, as well as the cladistic taxonomies and conceptualized analyses that are so human in their ambition to explain nature and tie everything together, as so painstakingly encapsulated in field guides. (Do you ever bird just by slowly roaming through the pages of a Peterson or Sibley guide?) Some have claimed that we will reach a point in our knowledge that all of nature could be expressed in an equation printed on a t-shirt. That is obviously a work in progress, but the goal is called the "Theory of Everything." Its current iteration does, in fact, fit on a t-shirt. I humbly suggest our experience of nature might not be so tidy. I expect my friend and I would concur on that point.

Presence and Absence

We have spoken much about the presence of birds, but little about their absence. There is a strong reason Rachel Carson (an Audubon member) called her classic, game-changing book on the devastation caused by DDT *Silent Spring*. The silence, the absence, becomes palpable to the reader. Absence does not necessarily connote loss, but if it is a repeated pattern, it often does. This is where citizen science and shared documentation can be very important, and apps like eBird and iNaturalist become powerful conservation tools.

The irruption of American Robins this past winter was a dramatic and unexpected presence. I witnessed a similar event last December when an old, massively branched Italian Stone Pine at the front of my apartment building hosted daily visitations of Yellow-rumped Warblers, mostly adult males, who appeared to be feasting on a serious infestation of scale insects. They gathered for weeks, flying in individually from different directions, chasing each other off to claim the most promising branches. A few weeks ago, the tree was professionally removed to make room for a new multi-level housing structure that will go up in the coming months. There will be an absence this winter.

You may have read the tale of Ash and Ashley, the long-mated pair of Ash-throated Flycatchers that nested and raised their broods at Silverwood for roughly 10 consecutive years. When Ash arrived in the spring of 2021, all looked well. The weeks passed, however and Ashley failed to show. When a new mate eventually joined Ash at his faithfully guarded nesting site, we realized one cycle had ended and a new one had begun. Presence and absence can be played out in ways that become truly personal. *(See our website for the full article,* The Birds of Silverwood, *July/August 2021* Sketches.*)*

Should we feel cheated when our nemesis bird fails to show once again? Maybe we need to sort out our reasons for seeking it. Birds do not appear at particular places and times simply to please us individually, or avoid us to thwart us. The celebration of discovery or the frustration in failure are ours, not the bird's. We can be grateful that they are free to fly along pathways known only to them.

As a final note I offer my own spark bird tale: When I was in junior high, I planted a Bailey's Acacia on the steeply sloped bank in our backyard. I tended it faithfully, and though the soil was poor, it had grown some. One morning I looked out my bedroom window and saw an adult male Western Tanager perched in my spindly tree. Many of the things I've tried to give voice to in this article swept through my mind, though I'm sure they would have come out quite differently then. Not only was the bird stunning, surprising, and in bold display, it had honored my early attempt at tree planting by stopping to perch. It soon swooped off to another tree in another yard, and I never saw it again. Since then, I've planted a lot of trees. I have seen a few more tanagers over the years, but no individual sighting that I have a clear memory of. But for those few seconds, my tree was a forest, and that single bird was a great flock.

Enjoy beautiful, and personal, birding.

A Cheerful Sampling of Spark Birds

"In and around 1970, I visited a friend with whom I'd worked in Canada while in college. She'd married an ornithologist and they were living in Vancouver. He suggested we go to a lake to look at birds. That was the 'spark' that set me up for over 50 joy-filled years of birding." *Susan Breisch*

"My fascination with birds started with a pet green-and-yellow **Budgie**. I suppose this first bird opened my senses to watch for birds, because I have always been aware of them and curious about them. In middle school, our dog brought in an injured sparrow that I took care of until it could be released. When I got divorced, I got a parrot to keep me company. When I was laid off from a tech job (that I never really wanted), I comforted myself by taking a cashier job at one of only a handful of public bird zoos in the country. Birds have been dependable teachers for me in my journey to where I am today." *Jen Hajj*

"A bird that got me into birding is **Anna's Hummingbird**. I love the colors and how noisy they are. Every time I see a hummingbird it makes me happy. They say that hummingbirds are good luck. I always do find them so fascinating how a small creature can consume large amounts of nectar at day and how fast they move their wings and how fast their heart beats per minute (1260 beats)." *Karina Ornelas*

Willet by Ed Henry

"**Cormorant**—Green-eyed beauty. The fisherman that I first fell in love with while snorkeling La Jolla shores and later while watching him race through the water in La Paz Mexico fishing for his lunch beneath the waves." *Sally Kaufman*

"Hearing the term 'spark bird' reminded me of that sweet moment I felt embraced by the spell of birds—when a family of **Yellow-rumped Warblers** visited the little birdbath out my window. Oh what I'd never before noticed!" *Syd Hayes*

"The **Willet**. I had been enjoying a lovely tannish-gray shorebird forage in the mud when it suddenly took flight—magical—its plumage took my breath. Spark!" *Shari Hatch*

And some anonymous offerings...

"I was five years old leaving a store with my dad at night when a **Barn Owl** flew over and shrieked. I asked my dad what the bird was and he said a Barn Owl. My dad passed away suddenly later that year, but my love for Barn Owls and all birds never died. It grew stronger over the years."

"I absolutely love owls, really any species. A friend had a nesting pair of **Great Horned Owls**, with three owlets, in her yard, and invited me to come over and sit in her backyard and enjoy observing them from a distance. As early evening was approaching, the female flew out of the nest, landing on the log on the hillside. Within seconds, the male flew in and landed right next to her. I was in awe—two beautiful Great Horned Owls, sitting right next to each other. Quite an amazing sight to see."

"The **Northern Flicker** was my spark bird. I was in 5th grade and I remember being so mesmerized by all the little black dots and details of their feathers. It made me think if something this beautiful was at a random urban park, what else is out there?"

"Probably the **Marbled Godwits**. I think I just saw them when I first started beach cleaning around Tourmaline and always saw them. They seem so social."

"**Loons!** Heard their wail echo across a lake in the middle of the night in Alaska and wanted to learn about the animal that made these haunting sounds. The common loon's spotted black and white feathers in summer are amazing."

"**Scrub-Jays**. My grandparents and great-grandad used to hide peanuts while the Scrub-jays would sit in the tree in their backyard. My great-grandad would sit on the patio watching them flip over containers and retrieve peanuts."

Six-Hundred and Eighteen

by Janet Shields

The year I really fell in love with birding was my third year of college. I transferred into MIT starting in my sophomore year, and from my dorm window on the fifth floor, I could see nothing but houses and small towns and trees. I missed the view from my bedroom window in Santa Barbara, of the coastal mountains shining in the morning sun. I desperately missed the wild outdoors. The following year, I made friends with Ann, a young woman who lived just outside Cambridge with her mom, in an old farmhouse on the Charles River. It was gorgeous out there with the old house surrounded by a mixed forest of hardwoods and pines. I'd wake in the morning to hear jays calling, and when we went outside, there were chickadees, warblers, and an amazing variety of birds. I was hooked, and that Christmas my parents gave me my first birding journal, so I could keep track of my sightings.

The decades passed. By the end of 2014, my life list for North America north of Mexico, otherwise known as the American Birding Association (ABA) Area, was up to 537, and I definitely thought it would be fun to hit 600. In the 1960s, Audubon magazine profiled the small number of birders who comprised the "600 Club". My mother hit 600 around 1980, and was one of a small crowd. Now, hitting 600 is not a big deal, but it is still a threshold of interest.

This last winter the bird alert had been regularly reporting a Mountain Plover found at the dog run on Fiesta Island. This little plain brown bird often winters in Imperial County, and yet I believe it had been about a decade since one had been seen in San Diego County. I went down to hunt for him three or four times without success, and finally called Phil Pryde and asked if he would enjoy meeting me to lend his karma and expertise. I thought I'd looked all over the dog run, but he took a path mid-way between two paths I'd previously taken, and within two minutes said "There he is!" He was the same color as the dirt, with a belly the same color as the dry sticks strewn randomly about, yet he was obvious once I saw him, and really cute. He was Bird #600, seen on December 12, 2017!

Mountain Plover by DS

So, when and how will I hit my new goal, achieved by my mother, of 618? I have a trip coming up, to go to South Florida and the Dry Tortugas, which are some keys 70 miles west of Key West. I'm excited to bird in this new area, where there are huge nesting colonies of Masked Boobies, Sooty Terns, and Brown Noddies. Altogether, there are about thirteen species that it's possible I could see, so I'm figuring I may actually see five or six "lifers." I probably won't hit 618 this year, but what a lovely excuse for a future trip to the Aleutians or Maine or wherever the wanderlust takes me. Someday I'll do more international birding. But for now, 618: that's my goal.

(Editor's note: Janet's life list now stands at "about 725.")

Betting It All On Red

How a single hummingbird got me into birding and helped me find my flow

by Sandeep Dhar

It took 16,031 days before I saw my first hummingbird. A sudden announcement, no more than two feet away from me and at eye level. In the early morning light, I caught a glimpse of magenta on its thorax and sea green on its abdomen. It turned to one side and then the other, wingbeats barely discernible, as if trying to decide what to do next. Our gaze connected and a rush of sensory awareness closed the rest of the world around me. The bird had my full attention and just as I was beginning to register other fine features, it turned around and with a powerful buzzing sound sped away and disappeared into the forest. I had stayed behind the pack because I did not understand Spanish enough to benefit from the trail guide's explanations, but after the bird flew away, he approached me with a big grin. "You wear red, it comes to you."

Hummingbird lore can fill volumes for those smitten by these sleek and energetic birds. One particular Allen's Hummingbird, named Bruno because of his aggressive defense of his territory, deserves a book of his own. I would like to think that Bruno was born in the lower branches of the tree on our hill, but I can't be sure. A little while after my Costa Rica trip, a feeder with a bright red base was installed. It was early spring, and a diminutive hummingbird began to visit it regularly. One day I followed her flight path and it led to her nest. Alarmed, she took off in an instant, away from her nest and the next moment hovering in front of my face, emitting high-pitched notes. "I mean you no harm," I said, as I squatted and then slowly backpedaled down the hill.

The next day, at the bottom of the hill, I went to work on a six-foot by four-foot cage built from irrigation pipes. Draped with shower curtains it served as the housing for my camera-on-tripod setup for the next few weeks, automatically taking photos of the nest every few minutes. The family reveled in images of the transformation from blind chicks to soon-to-be-seasoned flyers. Fearless, pugnacious, and inquisitive, these are the characteristics we assign to hummingbirds, but sensitive and communicative? I have seen Bruno shoo away a warbler that got too close to one of Miss Peach's younglings. Flying mere inches above the warbler, Bruno swung back and forth like a metronome on a fast tick and blocked the warbler's passage through the branches. Miss Peach arrived moments later to feed her young.

What happened next between Bruno and Miss Peach was either a playful chase, a delicate dance of domination or both. I know I had witnessed something special because Bruno does not let other birds near the feeders and works tirelessly to chase them away from the flowers, yet he did not respond the same way with the youngling. I felt that we still had a lot to learn about hummingbirds.

Often, I have seen him flare his gorget towards us when he perches on a branch closest to our outdoor canopy tent. In a recent incident, we were seated outside when the skies darkened and sharp, slanting rain drummed out our conversations. I was admiring the verdant colors of our backyard when I saw Bruno perched on a bare twig. "What is this silly hummingbird doing in such heavy rain." It's as if he read my mind, because Bruno launched himself into the air, hovered and flew like an arrow slicing the space between branch and tent in a mere second, coming to an abrupt stop only inches in front of my wife's face. She let out a scream, hot matcha spilling to the floor. Bruno did an equally spectacular retreat. "I think he was trying to communicate with you," I told my wife. We never saw Bruno attempt to enter the tent again.

Bruno is getting to his fifth year, or about the natural lifespan of an Allen's Hummingbird. I shared a dream with my wife that I woke up one morning to find Bruno motionless on the cold concrete. I cupped my fingers and gently placed him in my hands. He flinched, then opened his eyes. "I remembered everything," he said to me as he perked up, wings beating. "I am the *dah-hi-tu-hi*—the one who brings life," as he flew vertically, out of sight and into the void.

Bruno the Allen's Hummingbird, by Sandeep Dhar

A Costa Rica Rendevous

by Rebecca Kennedy, Communications Manager

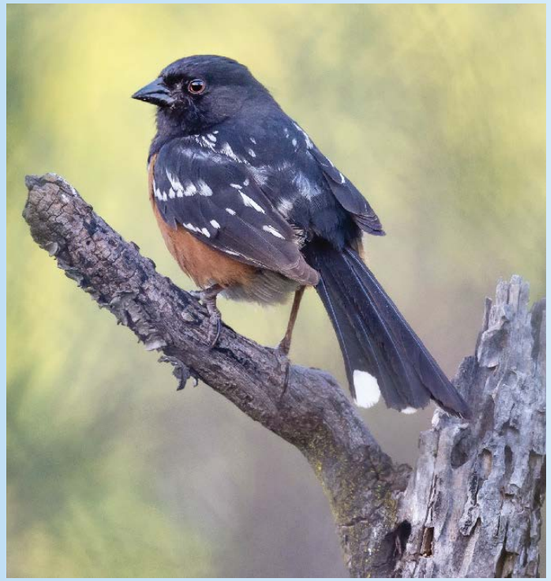
One day I met a toucan. It wasn't until that day, lying on a flat rock in the middle of a rushing river in Costa Rica under the rainforest canopy, that I realized birds are fascinating. Sure, I'd grown up on the beaches of San Diego thoroughly convinced that seagulls could live off of french fries and knowing that mockingbirds are the loudest about 30 minutes before your alarm goes off. But I never really cared. Birds were there, but they weren't interesting. Not until that day I met a certain Yellow-billed Toucan.

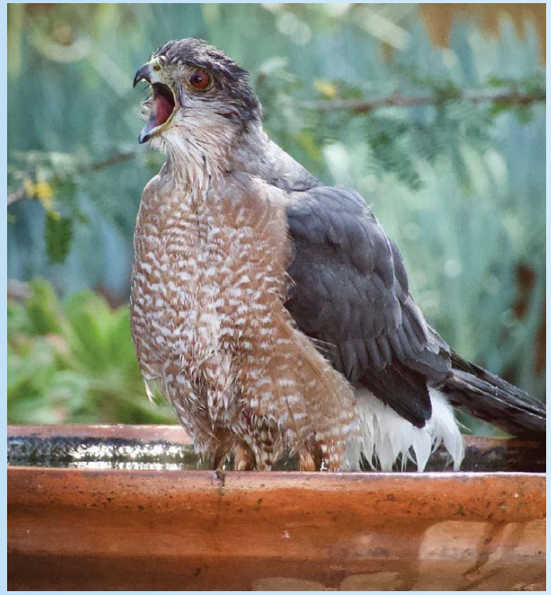
I was living in Costa Rica and had visited this waterfall a dozen times before. This particular day the main pool under the falls was crowded with local school children just out for the day, so I didn't take my usual swim. Instead, I set myself up in the middle of the river rushing away from the falls, on a large, flat rock perfect for me to eat my snack and take a nap. I'm not sure how long I slept, but when I woke up I turned to my right to find a toucan sitting on the rock a foot away just staring at me. When I stirred, it hopped backward but immediately came back to its original perch. After a while I started talking to it. It sat there, cocking its head periodically like a dog does.

It stayed there for about 10 minutes. Eventually I sat up and it flew into the tree branch hovering above the rock. Once I was up, it swooped back down to reclaim its place on the rock and watch me.

It didn't want my food. I tried feeding it some chips (gulls like chips, so why wouldn't toucans?) but it wasn't interested. I can't claim to know why the bird sat there so long. Was I an intruder? Was it just curious? Was it hoping I would pull out french fries instead?

Sitting so closely to this absolutely stunning bird, who was clearly thinking through some things, was a life-changing experience. I was having a National Geographic moment. I learned that birds could think and feel, are curious and persistent, and can be silly and sassy. They are more like other animals than I ever appreciated. From that experience was born an interest in birds and their small but mighty personalities!





A call went out to many from the deep talent pool of our chapter's photographers to provide a personal spark bird photo. Though most could not limit their response to a single species, the stunning images to the left give a tantalyzing glimpse of what may await you around the next curve on the path. In sequence, by row:

Peregrine Falcon. The fastest animal on earth, Peregrine Falcons can dive 250mph. During nesting season mom falcon takes her job very seriously, and while papa is out hunting for the chicks, she spends her time escorting the innocent Brown Pelicans away from the nest. *Krisztina Scheeff, KS Nature Photography*

A **Spotted Towhee**, one of my first birds I would try and photograph. I could hear the call, but rarely get much of a glimpse, for they love foraging on the ground beneath shrubs. When it perched on top of this branch and posed, what a beauty, I was hooked on birding. *Tammy Kokjohn*

SPARK BIRDS

American Avocet *(Recurvirostra americana)* flying over the Dakin Unit at the Honey Lake Wildlife Area in northeast California. *Craig Chaddock*

When we got our first hummingbird feeder in late 2013, this male **Anna's Hummingbird** became my muse, and this was one of my favorite images of him. *Nathan French*

A **Black Skimmer** turns to gold as it reflects the evening sun while searching for fish off the coast of San Diego. *Nigella Hillgarth*

How about a backyard **Cooper's Hawk**? This is the bird that got me birding. During the nesting season it came every day to take a bath. Fifteen years later Coops are still bathing in the bird bath. I always wonder if these are offspring of the original bird. *Karen Straus*

Western Bluebirds by LaTresa Pearson

The Summer I Turned Birdy

by LaTresa Pearson, Sketches Editor

I first fell for Western Bluebirds when Resident Manager Phil Lambert introduced me to a pair nesting in the bluebird box near his residence at the Silverwood Wildlife Sanctuary. Perched in a Coast Live Oak, the cobalt blue male with his rust-colored breast and the softer hued female watched me as intently as I watched them. While Phil ducked into the residence to retrieve some mealworms, the female bluebird flew down to a utility box attached to a post nearby. After eyeing the ground, she lifted off, hovered for a few wingbeats, and then returned to the box. She repeated this ritual a few more times, looking at me expectantly each time. Realizing I had nothing to offer her, she gave up and took refuge in her nest box. Phil soon emerged with a handful of mealworms and tossed a few onto the ground. The male immediately swooped down and scooped up a beakful. The female followed, selected a single mealworm, and hopped to the top of a landscape light to swallow it. I was enchanted by the interaction Phil had with them, and a little envious.

A few months later, near my back fence, a pair of Western Bluebirds and their two fledglings began foraging for insects in the early evening. I jumped at the chance to encourage their visits. I bought some live mealworms, along with a small feeding dish, which I hung in my backyard. They continued to visit for several days, but they wouldn't come near the feeder. Early one morning, I saw the two juveniles perched on either end of our hammock, which was secured to a couple of trees at the base of a small slope. Remembering how Phil tossed the mealworms on the ground, I grabbed a small handful and slowly approached the top of the slope to toss a few down. The bolder of the two youngsters turned its head to the side, eyeing my wriggling offering. It cautiously flew to the ground, grabbed a mealworm, and flew back up to its perch on the hammock to eat it. Reassured that I hadn't moved, it flew back down and gobbled up a few more mealworms before returning to the safety of the hammock. Not wanting to miss out, the other young bluebird soon ventured down. I was thrilled!

The next morning, I looked out the window, and the two juvenile bluebirds were back at their perches on the hammock. My heart leapt, and I hurried to grab a few mealworms to toss to them. This ritual continued for several days, and each day the young bluebirds grew bolder. As soon as I walked outside, they would fly toward me and then circle back to their perches, eagerly awaiting their treats. Their parents, however, kept their distance, preferring to perch on the fence and observe. Hoping to attract the adult pair, I went back to putting some mealworms in the feeding dish. Finally, the adult male flew to the dish one morning and began feeding on the mealworms. Soon, his mate joined him.

That was two years ago, and to my delight, they've continued to visit every day since. The first spring after the adult pair began visiting, they brought a new brood of fledglings with them. A second pair of bluebirds soon discovered the feeding dish and began bringing their fledglings, too. I had so many bluebirds—14 in all—that I had to introduce a second feeder to accommodate them all (and to discourage territorial battles). Then came the Hooded Orioles and their fledglings, the Bewick's Wrens, the House Wrens, the Spotted Towhees, the California Towhees, the Dark-eyed Juncos, the Song Sparrows, the White-crowned Sparrows, the Black-headed Grosbeaks, and even a surprise visit from a Rose-breasted Grosbeak.

Every morning when I venture out to stock the feeders, I'm greeted by my feathered friends. The Western Bluebirds chirp and circle overhead, and I can't help feeling a little like a Disney princess. Now, if only I could teach them how to do chores!


Coastal Sage restoration by Rebekah Angona

Wilson's Warbler by Ernie Cowan

Anstine Ambles *Anstine Welcomes Visitors Back with New Improvements... and Fall Feathered Friends*

by Rebekah Angona, Anstine-Audubon Nature Preserve Resident Manager

As we enter the fall season, the Anstine-Audubon Nature Preserve welcomes guests back to discover the wonderful wildlife and trails we have to share with the community. While the preserve was closed to the public over the summer, we completed many large-scale infrastructure projects to improve our trails and enhance native habitat for wildlife. Guests may notice a new handrail around our observation deck, a new staircase leading down to the riparian area, and a newly leveled and restored trail running alongside the pond. Additionally, we began projects to restore the northeast portion of our property, including installing a new waterline and constructing a new fence along the northern boundary of the preserve in preparation for an approximate half-acre native plant restoration effort that will begin Winter 2023. These projects are being completed due to the generous funding provided by the Schoenith Foundation, SANDAG, and the State Coastal Conservancy.

All of these projects were completed to ensure that our property is a welcoming space for birders, hikers, students, nature lovers, and, of course, wildlife. Throughout the year, visitors observe birds such as California Quail, Northern Mockingbirds, California and Spotted Towhees, Green Herons, Mallards, and Red-tailed Hawks. As the days grow shorter and the weather begins to cool, however, guests encounter a colorful explosion of fall migratory birds. Wood Ducks and Hooded Mergansers grace the pond, coexisting happily as they hide together among the reeds. Red-winged blackbirds sing from the cattails, while Mountain Chickadees, White-crowned Sparrows, and a variety of warblers frequent the bird feeders. Phainopepla and Ruby-crowned Kinglets fly through the trees, and once the Toyon berries ripen, Cedar Waxwings and American Robins appear to pluck the small red berries from the branches. Fall leaves mute the Western Tanager's brilliant colors with their fiery oranges, reds, and yellows.

Although cooler temperatures typically aren't synonymous with a spike in insect activity, Orb Weaver spiders defy the odds. Their intricate webs often span the width of the trail, capturing not only unexpecting prey, but also the occasional distracted hiker. If you find yourself in need of some time in nature, then join us at the Anstine-Audubon Nature Preserve to enjoy the soft sounds of chirping birds and of crunching leaves this fall.

Anstine-Audubon Nature Preserve is open to the public on Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. and the third Wednesday of the month from 8 a.m. to 11 a.m., October–June. To learn more, please visit www.sandiegoaudubon.org/what-we-do/anstine.


Improved observation deck by Rebekah Angona

Silverwood Wildlife Sanctuary Opens In October

Silverwood's fall migrant bird species usually begin arriving in September, with Audubon's Yellow-rumped Warblers kicking things off. They are followed in the first few weeks of October by White-crowned Sparrows, Golden-crowned Sparrows, Fox Sparrows, Dark-eyed Juncos (Oregon, Pink-sided, and Slate-colored). Yellow-rumped Warblers and Hermit Thrushes often can be found mingling at the water features in the observation area, while a hike along Silverwood's trails may provide sightings of Sage Sparrows. A look toward the ridge line may also reveal White-throated Swifts soaring high above. Be sure to put Silverwood on your list of things to do in October.

Silverwood Wildlife Sanctuary in Lakeside is free and open to the public on Sundays from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Registration required. To sign up for a visit, RSVP at www.sandiegoaudubon.org/what-we-do/silverwood. Silverwood is also open on Wednesdays, 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. for SDAS members only. Please call a week in advance of the day of your visit at (619) 443-2998. See our web page for all updates.

San Diego Bird Festival 2024 *Birds Make Us Better*

Marina Village Conference Center / February 21–25

by Jen Hajj, Public Programs Manager

Every February we look forward to the biggest, birdiest event of the year: The San Diego Bird Festival, where we celebrate the wild birds and habitats of San Diego County, and the people who love and protect them.

Have you noticed that birds have been in the news lately? People are catching on that birds aren't just good for healthy habitats; they're good for our well-being. Recent studies have shown that listening to birdsong, even for a short time, is enough to boost one's mood for hours. New books like *Keep Looking Up* by Tammah Watts and O*rnitherapy* by Holly Merker help us tap into strategies for deep healing—all by looking at, listening to, and learning about birds!

To that end, our featured keynotes for 2024 will share their unique perspectives on the human connection with birds:

Julia Zarankin is a Toronto-based award-winning writer, cultural tour guide, and lecturer. Her memoir, *Field Notes from an Unintentional Birder*, is a Canadian bestseller and her writing has been featured in *Audubon, Birding Magazine, Canadian Geographic, The Walrus*, and *The Globe and Mail*. When not hanging out with a spotting scope at sewage lagoons in hopes of getting a better handle on shorebirds, Julia lectures to lifelong learners in and around Toronto.

Tiana Williams-Clausen is a member of the Yurok Tribe and was raised in Klamath, California, on the Yurok Reservation. She received her BA in Biochemical Sciences from Harvard University and returned to serve her tribe. She is currently pursuing a Master of Sciences in Natural Resources from California Polytechnic State University, Humboldt, and serves as the Yurok Tribe Wildlife Department Director. Her team's work includes the reintroduction of California Condors to Yurok country, integrating traditional knowledge from the Yurok community into government wildlife management practices. Her native upbringing and formal education allow her to bridge the gap between traditional understandings of the world and those rooted in Western science.

Christian Cooper is a *New York Times* best-selling author, with his debut memoir, *Better Living Through Birding*. He is also the Host and a Consulting Producer for *National Geographic*'s hit series *Extraordinary Birder with Christian Cooper*. Practically born with a pair of binoculars in his hands, he served as president of the Harvard Ornithological Club in his college days. Currently, as a vice president of New York City Audubon, he advocates for greater, safer access to green spaces for all, with a focus on outreach to youths in underserved communities. A longtime activist on issues of racial justice and LGBTQ equality, Christian combined his passions in the BLM (Black Lives Matter) graphic short story *It's a Bird* from DC Comics, and he continues to seek synergy at the intersections of storytelling, progressivism, and environmentalism.

And of course, you'll also be able to go on field trips to every corner of the county (including an overnight trip to Salton Sea and Anza-Borrego), attend workshops and lectures at the festival grounds, and browse our exhibit hall, featuring the who's who of birding business and our beloved **Red Bird Bookstore**.

A festival pass is $35 for adults and $10 for youth ages 13–18. Kids under 12 get in for free. Many activities have a separate activity fee, which ranges from $10 to $165 per activity. Registration for SDAS members begins October 25. If you're a member, you will receive an email with a link for registration. Make sure your email address is up to date with us. Open registration for the festival begins November 1, 2023, at 9:00 a.m.

We have a 4-night post-festival trip this year, offered in partnership with **Red Hill Birding**. **Central Valley, Mountain Foothills, and Santa Cruz Island** is currently available for registration. This tour will take us to many different habitats to seek some of the California specialties you might not see at the festival. We'll be searching for LeConte's Thrasher, Bell's Sparrow, Mountain Plover, California Condor, White-headed Woodpecker, Yellow-billed Magpie, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Lawrence's Goldfinch, and Tricolored Blackbird. We'll top it off with a boat ride to Santa Cruz Island, home of the endemic Island Scrub-Jay.

New this year is **Camp Surfbird**, a unique overnight camp experience for youths ages 13–17 who are interested in birds and natural history. We're working with the American Birding Association to create an unforgettable weekend (Friday, February 23, to Sunday, February 25) for young birders to gather together and explore the region with like-minded peers. Please help us share this new offering!

Find out more about the entire San Diego Bird Festival program on our website: www.sandiegoaudubon.org/birding/san-diego-bird-festival/


Reddish Egret DS

Go Lights Out, San Diego!

by Sree Kandhadai

By the time you read this, I will have left for college. I will be surrounded by new people and by new birds. I will be learning how to be a scientist. But I also won't be home for San Diego Audubon's habitat restoration events. I won't be able to watch San Diego's California Least Terns fledge and fly. I won't be able to volunteer at the Kendall-Frost Marsh on weekends and show people why I care so much about our wildlife.

The opportunity to protect birds has been the greatest gift I have received in my short 18-year lifetime. It has changed the way I see nature, something I can no longer separate myself from, for when I take actions to help birds, I take actions to help friends. As I leave my wonderfully biodiverse hometown for seasons and snow, I want to pass on that gift to everyone here by inviting you to participate in Lights Out, San Diego!

I knew light pollution existed, but I never thought about its impact on birds until I attended the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Young Birders Program last summer. In addition to birding, the program focused on ways to protect birds. It emphasized success stories, such as Lights Out, Texas!, where citizens came together, encouraged by local organizations such as Audubon Texas, and switched off nonessential lights during migratory periods. The difference it made to light pollution was spectacular to see in the slide presentation.

I learned that 80% of North America's migratory birds migrate at night, something I never knew until the Young Birders Program. But light pollution can be a major obstacle, drawing birds to cities where they can become disoriented. Light pollution can also lead to delays in migration, as birds can slow down when flying in areas polluted with light. They may end up reaching their destinations only to discover the best breeding territories are gone, or that there is very little food left for them, their mates, and their chicks. In brightly lit cities, birds can end up flying around in circles over and over until they die of exhaustion. They may also collide into buildings; in one week in 2017, 400 birds died from colliding into a single Texas skyscraper. To prevent such tragedies from happening here, I hope San Diego's residents, building owners, and building managers can come together to curb light pollution, something that (and this provides so much comfort to me) is very much within our control!

Reducing light pollution will benefit us humans, too. I never noticed just how much light pollution we have in the city until my parents and I drove up to Julian, where I represented the San Diego Audubon Society at the proclamation that declared Julian an International Dark Sky Community. After the proclamation, my dad and I went to get pie and returned for the star party—I wanted to stay forever. The sky was somehow pitch black, despite the innumerable stars shimmering like a hummingbird's gorget. Unlike a hummingbird's gorget, however, those stars glowed with bright white permanence, not ephemerality. And yet, like a gorget, if seen from a different location, those stars would be invisible. From just an hour's drive away from my home, the pearls of starlight would have been drowned out in a sea of skyglow.

After that night in Julian, I began to notice the absence of stars and the ever-present glow of light. Every night when I took a walk with my mother, I saw the light from the nearby baseball field cast up into the sky. When I went to the Bay Area to visit my cousin, I noticed it streaming through her blinds, and I'd never been more grateful for my own blackout blinds. The light kept me awake. I've heard all about blue light from my electronic devices stopping melatonin production and keeping me awake, but that same light is in so many streetlamps and in my own house lights. Whether or not we know it, we've all lost our stars and our sleep to light pollution.

We can help change that this fall. Beginning each August, San Diego experiences nights where a million, two million, three million birds may migrate through our county in a single night alone. We can protect them with simple actions, such as installing downshielded or motion-activated lights. Even something as simple as the flip of a switch or the lowering of blinds can make a difference. Please see our website for more information about Lights Out, San Diego!

Beyond Feathers *The Far-reaching Impact of Climate Change on Human Health*

by Sally Kaufman, M.D., Co-Chair of San Diego's American Academy of Pediatrics Climate Change and Health Committee

While climate change's effect on avian populations is widely acknowledged, its impact extends beyond its immediate environmental implications. Its repercussions extend to a crucial aspect of our lives: human health. Climate change isn't confined to political debates; it's a health crisis that demands our attention. The medical community has sounded the alarm, labeling climate change as a dire public health threat. The American Academy of Pediatrics, in 2015, declared, "Global climate change is a leading public health threat to all current and future children." Numerous medical bodies including the World Health Organization, American Lung Association, American College of Physicians, and American Medical Association have done the same.

At the crux of this crisis lies the combustion of fossil fuels, the primary driver of climate change. Not only does the extraction and burning of fossil fuels release carbon dioxide and methane into our atmosphere, causing climate change, but it also releases pollutants that directly harm human health. Among its sinister byproducts, ozone and particulate matter 2.5 (PM 2.5) emerge as the most egregious culprits. As a corrosive gas, ozone damages the fragile tissues of our airways, causing both immediate and long-term lung damage. PM 2.5, named for its minuscule size, infiltrates the tiniest lung sacs, permeates the bloodstream, and unleashes havoc on our bodies—triggering lung and heart diseases, neurological disorders, surges in allergies, and premature mortality.

The scope of climate change's impact isn't uniform. Underserved communities and marginalized populations face a double jeopardy—not only are they directly exposed to more fossil fuel pollution, but they also suffer from existing health disparities that are further exacerbated by climate change. Shockingly, an estimated 10.2 million deaths worldwide are attributed solely to PM 2.5 from fossil fuel combustion. Even unborn infants aren't immune. Exposure to pollutants such as ozone and particulate matter during pregnancy heightens the risk of stillbirths, premature births, and underweight babies. *(Continued on next page)*

(Continued from page 10)

Children and the elderly also bear a disproportionate burden due to their distinct physiological vulnerabilities. Children's higher rates of air intake and water consumption relative to their body weight render them particularly susceptible to airborne and waterborne pollutants. As we age, our ability to regulate excess heat diminishes and the prevalence of chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, and lung disorders makes us more vulnerable to climate-induced illnesses.

Amid the devastating consequences of climate change, heat-related illnesses emerge as the leading environmental cause of death. An alarming one-third of heat-related deaths can be directly attributed to anthropogenic climate change.

As a primary care physician, I engage in daily discussions with my patients about allergies, including how climate change is worsening their allergies. Elevated carbon dioxide levels have propelled plants to produce double the pollen they did a century ago. As our climate warms, the pollen season has extended, with earlier springs and delayed frosts across the United States. Additionally, elevated occurrences of atopic, or allergic, diseases such as eczema, food allergies, seasonal allergies, and asthma are observed in children directly exposed to pollutants from fossil fuel combustion, such as those residing in close proximity to highways.

It's not just birds that are relocating due to soaring temperatures; insects are also on the move. Vector-borne diseases, disseminated by creatures such as ticks and mosquitoes, are shifting from equatorial regions toward the poles. The United States, previously untouched by diseases such as Dengue, Chikungunya, and Zika, now hosts the mosquitoes that carry them. The number of cases of Lyme disease grows as the tick responsible for carrying the disease finds suitable habitat throughout a larger area of the United States.

Even our sustenance is compromised by rising CO_2 levels. As crops grow in elevated carbon dioxide environments, they become less nutritious, lacking essential nutrients such as protein, iron, and zinc.

The impact of climate change extends far beyond the realm of our feathered friends. It directly affects human health, echoing through vulnerable populations and leaving a trail of health challenges, ecological disruptions, and conservation dilemmas. Urgent collective action is the only way forward—for the birds, for our health, and for the planet.

Kendall-Frost Welcomes Seven New Ridgway's Rails

by Karina Ornelas, Conservation Outreach Coordinator

Karina with light-footed friend

In late August, several organizations, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the City of San Diego, the San Diego Audubon Society, and the Living Coast Discovery Center, gathered at UCSD's Kendall-Frost Marsh Reserve for the release of seven captive-bred Ridgway's Rails. Raised at Living Coast Discovery Center as part of a USFWS Ridgway's Rail breeding program, the seven rails are now old enough to thrive on their own in their new home.

The Critically Endangered Light-footed Ridgway's Rail has been found to nest in just 18 marshes in Southern California, including Kendall-Frost. The seven new captive-bred rails are a welcome addition and will, we hope, add to the marsh's productivity. Under optimal conditions, the reclusive, rusty-brown birds build their nests out of the tall cordgrass that grows in thriving saltmarsh habitats. The cordgrass at Kendall-Frost, however, isn't healthy enough for the rails to build their own nests, so UCSD has placed nesting platforms throughout the marsh to provide nesting habitat and protection from predators. During the summer, biologists found three hatched eggs on the artificial nesting platforms, so there are new chicks at the marsh! In addition, in partnership with UCSD and Renascense Inc., a non-profit focused on reconnecting Native Americans to the land, we have installed four new wildlife cameras to monitor the behavior of the rails and to see what other wildlife use the nesting platforms.

The 1985 Light-Footed Clapper Rail Recovery Plan's aim is to have 800 breeding pairs in Southern California, but that goal cannot be achieved without adding more saltmarsh habitat. The mission of the ReWild Coalition, led by San Diego Audubon, is to restore wetlands in the northeast corner of Mission Bay to improve habitat for the Ridgway's Rail. Restoring habitat not only benefits our little rust-colored friend, but also benefits us by improving water quality, building climate resiliency, and sequestering carbon. We're very grateful for the support of our ReWild Coalition members and local representatives such as Councilmember Joe LaCava for their help in making more wetlands the future of Mission Bay. To learn more about how you can help restore wetlands for the endangered Ridgway's Rail, go to rewildmissionbay.org.

A Light-footed Ridgway's Rail photographed by a wildlife camera set up on one of the nesting platforms.