



SONG SPARROW

Spring 2024 Vol. 54 No. 1
www.napasolanoaudubon.com

SPRING 2024 CALENDAR AT A GLANCE

- Apr. 11 Thu. Speaker Series: Why Birds Flock
- Apr. 13 Sat. Earth Night Festival at Connolly Ranch
- Apr. 14 Sun. Clear Lake
- Apr. 20 Sat. Earth Day Cleanup
- Apr. 20 Sat. Earth Day NSAS Table at Oxbow Commons
- Apr. 23 Tue. Earth Day Solano Community College
- May 04 Sat. NSAS Big Day of Birding
- May 09 Thu. Speaker Series: Birding Jewels of the Sierra Nevada
- May 11 Sat. eBird Global Big Day Cornell Lab of Ornithology
- May 11-12 Ashland OR - In Search of the Great Gray Owl Two Day - Sat. & Sun.



FLANNERY RD BURROWING OWL / MARK STEPHENSON

Saving our Burrowing Owls from Extinction

By Mark Stephenson

I can't imagine you would not become an avid, life-long birder if you've ever had a chance to spend a little time experiencing a Burrowing Owl colony.

They are certainly one of the cutest owls and are often seen nestled up with their mate, rubbing heads, and heard gently calling to each other with a perky "coo-cooo".

They breed in the prairies and farmlands of Napa and Solano Counties and often use ground squirrel tunnels for their nesting site. They actually share these subterranean fortresses with the ground squirrels in a symbiotic relationship.

Burrowing Owls' brown and white speckled plumage is not very fancy, but their large, bright yellow eyes, that appear to be intently watching you, are truly captivating. I have been concerned that Burrowing Owls are in decline and frustrated when I learn that yet another colony has been eradicated by development activities.

There was a wonderful colony of Burrowing Owls along Orange Drive in Vacaville where a community of approximately 10-12 owls had taken over a small berm adjacent to a golf course parking lot. But the golf course went out of business and developers waited until the late fall to bulldoze the berm.

Unfortunately, there is a terrible loophole in the Endangered Species Act,

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Spring Walks & Activities

Choose "Subscribe to email updates" on our website for more walks and activities.

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<https://tinyurl.com/NSAS-Subscribe>

President's Corner

By Mark Stephenson, NSAS President



Well, I'm coming to the end of my 4th year as your president. It has been a wonderful experience.

I would like to begin by recognizing and thanking Tom Slyker, our Vice President, who has accomplished an amazing amount of work during his 4 years of service. From the start, Tom jumped into several of our Citizen Science, Education and Birding activities. He has continued to expand our Bluebird Nest Box Program, coordinate our Bird Season's Weekly Surveys at American Canyon Wetlands and Benicia Community Park, institutionalize Beginner Bird Walks, support our School Program Field Trips, author Bird Notes to increase our communication during the Covid years, establish our new Kestrel Box Program, and participate in a number of Endangered Species and Heron Colony Surveys (*See the Dover Park article). He has been an incredible teammate throughout his tenure. Although he is stepping down as an officer he will continue his work supporting many of our Citizen Science and birding activities.

I'd also like to thank the Board Members and individuals who regularly support our work and help us to accomplish our goals:

- **Board Members:** *Barbara Navolanic / Program Chair* continues organizing our Monthly Meetings with our inspirational Speaker Series which we have provided in hybrid format and archived on our website since Covid. *David & Helena Kassel / Treasurer and Secretary*, perform a great deal of behind-the-scenes work, and together with Board Members and volunteers, help to support our many Community Events. *Judy Kahle* revamped our Membership Program and helps to recruit new members. *Pam Condos, our newest Director*, has contributed in many ways, including writing newsletter articles and coordinating our new Kestrel T-Shirt sales. *Robin Leong and Murray Berner* have done an amazing job coordinating our Christmas Bird Counts in Benicia and Angwin for nearly 40 and 15 years respectively!
- **Birding activities:** *Andrew Ford* continues his incredible help leading our Weekly Saturday Bird Walks to locations in both of our counties. *Tom Slyker, Carol Boykin & Karina Garcia* have supported regular Beginner Bird Walks at American Canyon Wetlands as well. *Carol Boykin, Wendy Cole & Bruce Thomsen* have done an incredible job organizing our Monthly Field Trips throughout the Bay Area and beyond.
- **Education in the Schools Program:** *Tammy Saunders, our Education Coordinator* has been diligently teaching children in our Napa classrooms over the last 3 1/2 years. She has helped me train a number of college interns and retired volunteers to provide lessons in Napa and Solano County schools. *Jane Hicks, our latest volunteer* is supporting us by teaching in Vallejo Schools. Together we have provided 4-5 lessons for close to 1,000 students over each of the last 3 years, bringing inspirational programs about birds and conservation into our children's classrooms. Tammy has also helped organize regular Junior Audubon and Summer Camp birding activities.
- **Community Events:** All our Board Members help to educate the public and reach out for new members at our many community events. Thank you! ▲

*The Fairfield Dover Park Heron ColonyDover Park Article by Ron Brown: We didn't have room to include it in this printed version of the Newsletter. However, it and several other articles, are included on the digital version, which can be downloaded from our website.

Board of Directors

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Board Meetings are open to members.

If you wish to attend, please call:
(707) 246-2795.

DONATIONS APPRECIATED!

Napa-Solano Audubon Society welcomes gifts of funds, stock, or property, and bequests in general, or in honor of the memory of a loved one. Gifts may be directed to any NSAS project.

Unspecified gifts will go for Education, Conservation or other projects. Since NSAS is an all-volunteer organization, 100% of your donation goes to this chapter. **All gifts are tax-deductible.**

VOLUNTEER APPEAL

- **The NSAS Website and eBlast announcements are our primary means of communication to keep you informed of our upcoming activities.** We are redesigning our website to improve communication and make access to our resources easier than ever. **We need volunteers to reinvigorate our Social Media Facebook and Instagram accounts next year as well.**
- **Volunteers and Feedback:** It is easy to see that there is so much more we can do as an organization to support birds and birding. We are always looking for volunteers that can lend a hand in various new endeavors. Please send us feedback to let us know how we can continue to improve our organization and please consider lending a hand in supporting our activities in any way that works for you!

Calendar of Events

SPEAKER PROGRAMS

Note: Programs are held on the second Thursday of the month in location and via Zoom. We encourage everyone to attend. You will be sent the meeting details in our regular eBlasts.

WHY BIRDS FLOCK

When: Thurs., April 11; 7:00 p.m.

Speaker: Jessica Griffiths, Wildlife Biologist

Location: NapaValley Lutheran Church & Hybrid Zoom

You may have heard the old saying “birds of a feather flock together”. Have you ever stopped to wonder why? Join Jessica Griffiths for a fascinating look at bird flocks and their behavior.

Why do some species of birds form flocks, while others do not? Why do geese & ducks fly in a “V” formation? How do birds flying in large flocks synchronize their movements? Learn the answers to these questions and more in this presentation, touching on bird biology and behavior, and highlights some remarkable scientific discoveries.

Jessica is a wildlife biologist at Colorado State University’s Center for Environmental Management of Military Lands.

BIRDING JEWELS OF THE SIERRA NEVADA: From the Valley Floor to the Sierra Crest

When: Thurs., May 9; 7:00 p.m.

Speaker: Denise & David Hamilton & Mark & Lucas Stephenson

Location: NapaValley Lutheran Church & Hybrid Zoom

Have you ever visited the Sierras and wondered where to go to find the most exciting birds? The Hamiltons and Stephensons have teamed together to share their 20 years of experience birding in the Northern Sierras from the Sierra Valley to the Sierra Crest, and further North. You’ll see their best photos of birds, plants & wildlife, exploring Sierra ecosystems from Marble Hot Springs on the valley floor, to unknown canyons around the perimeter, to the top of the Sierra Crest.

See favorite birding locations along Highways 49 & 89 from Bassett’s, Sardine Lakes & Yuba Pass to untraveled forest service roads. Learn about birding hotspots above Graeagle, from the Graeagle Lodge and Lakes Loop Trails, to Church Meadows and Mills Peak. For those curious of locations further North, they will explore spots near Lake Davis, Smith Peak & Bagley Pass. As an added bonus they will venture to a few locations in the high Eastern Desert including Frenchman Lake, Red Peak Pass and Shaffer Mountain. *Join us to see the flora and fauna they observed during their years of exploring these birding jewels of the Sierra!*

FIELD TRIPS

Note: Field Trips are open first to NSAS Chapter Members. There is often a limit of 12-15 participants & on a first sign-up, first-served basis, so be on the lookout for Monthly Trip Notices and be the first to sign-up! *If space is available, it will open to non-members shortly before the trip heads out.*

CLEAR LAKE

When: Sunday, April 14; 8:00 a.m.

Leader: Dr. Floyd Hayes

Clear Lake is the wintering & breeding grounds for a number of ducks, grebes, and herons as well as hawks, and eagles. We hope to see Common and Hooded Mergansers, Pied-billed, Eared, Horned, Western & Clark’s Grebes, as well as a variety of Ducks, Snowy & Great Egrets, Great Blue Herons, Ospreys, Bald Eagles, and a number of overwintering passerines.

We will begin the day at Redbud Park then continue counterclockwise around Clear Lake, visiting some of the following sites: Austin Park, Pirates Cove, Borax Lake, Clarks Island, Lucerne Harbor Park, Rodman Slough, Clear Lake State Park, Lakeside County Park, Anderson Marsh State Park.

Carpooling: Arrive by 6:20 a.m. at Nob Hill Foods with departure by 6:30.

Dr. Hayes is an ornithologist who has studied Western Grebes and is a Biology Instructor at Pacific Union College.

IN SEARCH OF THE GREAT GRAY OWL – ASHLAND, OR

When: May 11 & 12

Leader: Harry Fuller



GREAT GRAY OWL /
KAMERON PERENSOVICH

The largest owl in North America will be our top priority. *There are more Great Gray Owls in Jackson County, Oregon than all of California.* May is the height of their nesting season so the male is often hunting during the daytime, while his mate is on the nest. There are several locations east of Ashland where this species usually nests each year. The montane habitat is also home to many nesting birds not found in coastal or lower elevations.

We should see nesting Sandhill Cranes, Pileated and White-headed Woodpeckers, Mountain Bluebird, Wilson’s Snipe, American Dipper, Western Screech-Owl, Cassin’s Finch, Cassin’s Vireo, Vesper & Lincoln’s Sparrow, Green-tailed Towhee, Hermit, Nashville & MacGillivray’s Warblers, Osprey and Bald Eagle, and Common Merganser.

Other species that are present but more elusive: Williamson’s Sapsucker, Dusky & Hammond’s Flycatcher, Sooty and Ruffed Grouse, Mountain Quail, Canada Jay & Northern Goshawk.

Some of the more intriguing mammals around: Marmot, Short-tailed Weasel, Gray Wolf, Douglas Squirrel and River Otter.

Please note: This trip has a limit of 15 participants: Napa Solano Audubon members have preference. If there is space available, non-NSAS members are welcome.

WEEKLY WALKS

Please note: NSAS sponsors weekly birding walks led by ornithologist Andrew Ford, and open to everyone. Andrew has a wealth of information regarding birds, plants, and just about anything else you might happen to come across on these walks.

- Walks are usually from 8am – Noon, in Napa and Solano Counties, helping birders become familiar with our local birding hotspots.

- Please sign up for his emails on our website & complete the form: <https://tinyurl.com/NSAS-Subscribe>

- He will send out an email invite each week with locations and details to those who are signed up.

BEGINNER BIRD WALKS

Open to everyone. The NSAS Sponsored Bi-Weekly Beginner's Bird Walks with Tom Slyker, Carol Boykin and Karina Garcia are usually at the American Canyon Wetlands Park. These leaders are citizen science volunteers who have participated in our weekly Bird Seasons Surveys at this location that began in 2016 and have a wealth of knowledge about the birds you might see. The Wetlands is a great birding spot as it has a wide variety of species, from waterfowl to raptors and everything in between. **Look for our eBlasts with dates for the next Beginner's Bird Walk.**

JUNIOR AUDUBON BIRD WALKS

Our Education Coordinator, Tammy Saunders offers monthly Jr. Audubon Bird Walk for students, aged 7-15, who attend with their parents and want to learn more about birds. **Be on the lookout for Tammy's eBlasts on Junior Audubon Walks at our local parks.**



RENEWAL REMINDER: If you forgot to renew your NSAS Membership that expired, please visit our website and click on the JOIN button. We appreciate your support!

EVENTS

EARTH DAY CLEAN-UP AT NAPA CREEK

Saturday: April 20; 9:00 - 11:30 a.m.

Location: Napa's Main Street Parking Lot btwn Pearl & Clinton

Here is a wonderful opportunity to make our world cleaner for birds and ourselves. Betty Labastida chairs this event through Napa RCD (Napa Resource Conservation District). She will greet you with buckets, gloves and pickup devices — although if you have your own, please bring them.

Wear your grubby clothes because depending on your physical ability, you can get next to the river. Or just dress normal & walk the sidewalks.

When you bring the garbage back to Betty, she will sort out all the recyclables. *Betty is awesome!*

EARTH NIGHT FESTIVAL CONNOLLY RANCH

Saturday: April 13; 5:00 – 8:30 p.m.

Location: Connolly Ranch

Connolly Ranch Education Center will host its 10th annual Earth Night Festival; a celebration of arts, music, movement, and nature. Spend time with the animals, enjoy nature-based activities, good food and drink while dancing under the stars.

EARTH DAY NAPA VALLEY CELEBRATION

Saturday: April 20; 11:00a.m. - 4:00p.m.

Location: Oxbow Commons; 1268 McKinstry Street

Come visit our Tabling Booth and all the other fun activities!

EARTH DAY SOLANO COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Tuesday: April 23, 10:00a.m. - 1:00p.m.

Come visit our Tabling Booth at the 1400 Building (in front of the SCC Bookstore & Cafeteria) & visit with students who may be interested in careers in Wildlife & Conservation.



Or, point your phone's camera on the code and follow the link.

NSAS BIG DAY OF BIRDING

Saturday: May 4, 2024

Go birding with a friend or team in Napa and/or Solano County, and see how many birds you can find! Have fun whether you are birding around your neighborhood, or going to a new birding location in our area.

Keep track of the birds you see (we recommend using eBird), and share your checklist with us! Teams and individuals will celebrate the joys of discovering birds. **This is also a great opportunity to raise money for NSAS by finding a sponsor who is willing to donate to support your Big Day.**

Sponsors may choose to set a specific donation amount of \$10, \$20, \$50 etc., or based on the number of birds you locate! How about \$1.00 per bird?

Be sure to advise your sponsor how many birds you may be likely to find before they place their bid.

CORNELL LABORATORY OF ORNITHOLOGY'S eBIRD GLOBAL BIG DAY

Saturday: May, 11; All day, all time zones

Be a part of birding's biggest team in this annual celebration of the birds around you. Sign-up for a free eBird account, download the free eBird app for your cell phone, or enter sightings later on your home computer. Go out birding! **Global Big Day runs from midnight to midnight in your local time zone. You can report what you find from anywhere in the world.**



SAY NO TO THE FLANNERY MEGA-CITY. JOIN "SOLANO TOGETHER".

Solano Together is a group of concerned residents, leaders, and organizations who came together to form a coalition that envisions a better future for our region, that focuses development into existing cities & strengthens our agricultural industry.

To learn more, visit their website: www.solanotogether.org

Saving our Burrowing Owls from Extinction

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FLANNERY RD BURROWING OWLS / MARK STEPHENSON



that only protects endangered species habitat during their breeding season. *Developers can wait until the young owls have fledged and then eradicate their breeding site with no legal consequences.*

Another one of our consistently favorite locations for viewing Burrowing Owls, is along Flannery & Robinson Roads in the Suisun/Dixon area off of Highway 113. We have frequently observed 5-8 owls in this vicinity.

Unfortunately, this is ground zero for the proposed Flannery Associates development project that has surreptitiously purchased more than 60,000 acres of family farms and where it's planning to build a Mega-City (See the Conservation Advocacy Article). This is one of the many reasons we are strongly opposed to their secret development project.

NSAS Spring 2024 College Scholarship Awards Program

This Spring, NSAS will continue providing a one year, \$2,000 Scholarship for two high school seniors from Napa & Solano Counties who will be enrolled in the Fall of 2024 at a Community or 4-year College pursuing a course of study in ornithology, wildlife, conservation, environmental studies or related fields.

If you know of any students living in either Napa or Solano counties, who are continuing their education in one of these fields of study, please let them know they can apply for one of our scholarships. *To be considered, applications must be submitted by April 30, 2024.*

Eligibility requirements and more information on how to apply and are posted on our website homepage:

www.napasolanoaudubon.com ▲

I am heartened to learn that The Center for Biological Diversity and a coalition of conservation groups has filed a petition to fully protect Burrowing Owls, classifying them as endangered, and adding additional stipulations that the Owl's breeding grounds be protected year round, as well as the eradication of nearby ground squirrel tunnels which are essential for their survival.

In California, Burrowing Owls have disappeared from 19 of the 51 counties in which they once lived. According to Jeff Miller, a senior conservation advocate at the Center for Biological Diversity, it is estimated that their population was about 10,000 pairs in the 1990's but has shrunk to less than 6,000 pairs in recent years.

He believes this is a species that may become extinct in the Bay Area, and that they will certainly disappear if they are not further protected. This decline coincides with my experiences of searching for Burrowing Owls in Napa and Solano Counties.

If the Dept. of Fish & Wildlife declares Burrowing Owls as an Endangered Species, and closes loopholes protecting the destruction of their breeding grounds and burrows year-round, there is a chance we can turn the tide in their decline and save them in our area. *It is important to note that the burrowing owl was denied state protection 20 years ago with opposition from development and agricultural interests.*

We hope this time they will get it right and protect this amazing Owl along with its breeding habitat! We will do our best to keep you informed about these proceedings.

For more info, see: *Environmentalists ask California to Protect Burrowing Owls*, by Michael Cabanatuan; SF Chronicle; March 5, 2024. ▲

Make Certified Bird-Friendly Coffee Your Next Cup

By Pam Condos



Did you know 75% of the world's coffee is farmed with practices that leave no place for birds, destroying forest habitat? Most coffee farms are converting operations to full-sun. Crucial habitats for migrating and resident bird species are being rapidly lost. Shade is one of the key criteria for producing bird friendly coffee, according to the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center. Drinking certified shade grown coffee is one of the **Seven Simple Actions to Help Birds** as stated by the Cornell lab of Ornithology. The Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center first created its own Bird Friendly® certification standard for coffee more than 20 years ago. Farms are 100% organic & the program is also a critical asset in fighting climate change. It is the environmental gold standard in sustainable coffee (& cocoa) production. ***Look for their Bird Friendly Smithsonian logo.*** ▲

Conservation Advocacy

Keeping an Eye on Development Projects in Napa & Solano County

By Mark Stephenson, NSAS President

This is a followup to our Winter 2023 Newsletter's Conservation Article regarding the proposed, surreptitious Flannery Associates Development Project in Solano County.

At this moment Flannery Associates is poised to place an initiative on the November Solano County Ballot for citizens to approve their mega-city development project without an Environmental Impact Report. **Before Solano Citizens vote on this initiative, we encourage you to know a few things about it.**

Flannery Associates are hoping you will see all of the glitter in their initiative and advertising campaign. They have “promised” and even used the word “guarantee” for many tempting advantages to get your support & approve their initiative. *But what is crucial for citizens to know is that none of their promises and guarantees are legally binding. Here are just a few of their non-binding, empty promises:*

Housing

- 40,000 – 160,000 new homes including low and middle class homes (*with 3 occupants that would be nearly 500,000 new residents!*)
- Provide \$400 million in assistance to Solano County residents to purchase new homes.
- Do the citizens who might purchase a home in this Mega-City want to live in dense housing developments in the shadow of hundreds of wind mills? How many low income homes would really be built? Undoubtedly, many more larger, expensive homes to enrich the developers.

Jobs

- “Promises” 15,000 new jobs paying 125% more than the County's average annual income and the “opportunity” to Bring in Tech Jobs and other businesses.
- Would these jobs last more than a few years? Would tech companies really come?

Highway Infrastructure

- “Funding for more than their proportionate share of upgrading roads and highways.
- “Promises” a “private shuttle system” to nearby cities until the roads can be completed.
- All highways require a lengthy State approval process. Do you want to live in an isolated community without adequate roadways for a decade or more?

Schools

- Unspecified Millions for new Schools (No dollar amount, and no timeline!)

- Schools also require a lengthy approval process taking many years and are funded 50/50 by State and Local governments, with average costs of \$25/\$50/\$100 million for Elementary, Middle & High Schools.
- Do you want this Mega-City to be built with no schools in place to house the children, and be forced to provide space in your current, already over-crowded classrooms?

Water:

- Flannery “guarantees” they have obtained all the water rights for a city of 150,000.
- How will the water usage by 150,000 new residents in the Solano Basin affect your current, limited water supply and impact the vineyard and orchard farming's water needs, already existing or in your long-range plans?

Law Enforcement

- Do you want to add 160,000 citizens to your county without any legitimate “guarantee” to fund law enforcement or fire protection for this community?

Costs to Residents

- Flannery “Promises” no new taxes or fiscal obligations for Solano County Citizens and to reimburse any costs incurred by the County. *Flannery's plan is to pass costs onto the State, which by the way, consists of Solano County residents!*

Conservation

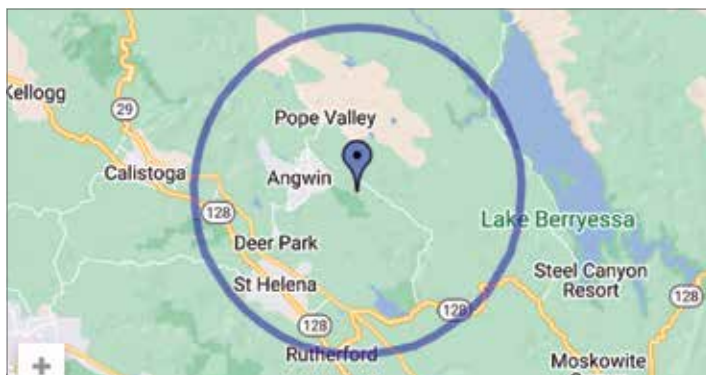
- Do you really want to allow Flannery Associates to bulldoze the family farms, prairies, and vernal pools that are home to a number of endangered plants, birds, and animals? Do you want them to build housing on top of the endangered Swainson's Hawk nests, and Tricolored Blackbird and Burrowing Owl colonies that exist at the center of their proposed development?

The Flannery Development Undermines Your Approved Long-term Plans: Do you want urban growth to rapidly sprawl far outside your existing city footprints of Vallejo, Fairfield, Vacaville, Dixon and Rio Vista, essentially developing the last bits of undeveloped farmland? *The Flannery Plan is the exact opposite of all of your careful, long-range planning that you have already undertaken and approved.* Do you really want housing developments to cover every inch of your county?

Remember, legally, Flannery Associates can promise the moon but don't have to provide even a minute portion of their “guarantees”, falsely enticing voters to vote “Yes” for this development. *Financial consultants estimate that Flannery's “guarantees” could amount to more than 10 billion dollars!* Will investors really contribute \$10 billion dollars for this housing development? **Highly doubtful.** *We might even guarantee they won't!*

We say NO to false promises and false guarantees. We say NO to development without an EIR that will help us to understand the real costs to our citizens and wildlife. We say NO to eradicating our family farmland, and our sensitive prairie environments! ▲

NSAS's Christmas Bird Counts 2023-24 Summary



ANGWIN CBC / JAN. 01, 2024

by Murray Berner

The 52nd Angwin CBC is complete. The weather was perfect. The species total was 137, a little higher than the recent average, and an increase from the past two years. The total number of individuals was 18,000. That figure is also average. While there are many years with 20,000-plus that number is reached when the starling or robin total is significant. There were 41 participants, including 10 birders new to the count!

Puddle ducks were found in average numbers. Divers, apart from a record number of Common Merganser, continue a modest decline. We missed Greater Scaup for only the fourth time in the count history. California Quail numbers are relatively high since the fires; perhaps there is a positive connection. Apart from Accipiters, raptors exceeded their recent averages, and Golden Eagle returned following a two-year absence.

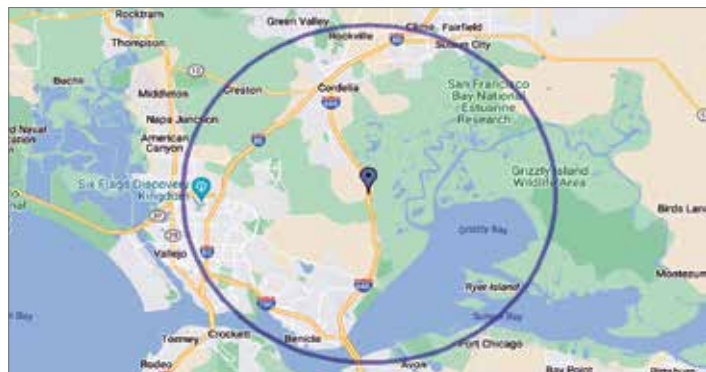
Despite some continental concern, American Kestrel maintains a steady annual presence in the eastern one-half of the count circle. The 12 Soras was double the previous high; eight were at Lake Hennessey. Central Pope Valley turned up a Long-billed Dowitcher, the second for the count. The 15 Spotted Sandpipers was a record showing. Surprisingly, the Band-tailed Pigeon total of 1204 was an all-time high. From a lack of owling effort, the totals were down. Perhaps related to the fires and the continuing forest thinning and tree removal, chickadees, titmouse, bushtit, and creeper exhibit a recent decline.

The Putah Creek kayakers found 11 Rock Wrens. Wrentit struggles to rebound from the fires; the total of two match last year's tally. Five Blue-gray Gnatcatchers at Berryessa and Hennessey is a CBC high. Sparrows and finches were a mix of modest increases and declines over their recent averages. Count week species were Burrowing Owl and Red Crossbill. **The count history 1973-2023 is available at <https://netapp.audubon.org/CBCObservation/>** **The count circle code is "CAAG."**

There were several rarities, including the 2nd count Pope Valley Long-billed Dowitcher. The 2nd count Yellow-bellied Sapsucker was at the Garden Avenue neighborhood.

A flock of Mountain Bluebirds returned to a Pope Valley field for another year. The count's 2nd Black-throated Gray Warbler was south of Zinfandel Lane along the river. A Harris's Sparrow was in the same yard as the first record in 2004-05. Rare but a little more regular are Swamp Sparrow, Chipping Sparrow, and a California Thrasher in St Helena on the valley floor!

Many thanks to Claudia Zinn who did an excellent job in her first year setting up the dinner, and we filled the room! Thanks to Ava & Betty for the main dishes, and to everyone that contributed to the dinner and the count.



BENICIA CBC / DEC. 18, 2023

by Robin Leong

Although this year's summary has not been submitted I will do my best to summarize the Benicia Count.

First, a big thanks to all participants and section leaders for helping out on the 2023 Benicia CBC, particularly counting in the stormy weather. I would especially like to thank the leaders of the 14 territories that make-up the standardized 15 mile diameter CBC circle. Rain threatened throughout the day, but fortunately, did not begin to pour until 2:00 p.m., when most of the sections had completed their count.

The Benicia count that includes coastal waters off from the Benicia Straits, marshlands up the Highway 680 corridor and along Suisun Bay & Grizzly Island helps this count to total 160+ species as well as good birding locations, including Rockville Hills, Lake Herman, the Benicia State Park, Lynch Canyon and Newell Open Space.

Highlights included Snow & Cackling Geese, Tundra Swans, Eurasian Wigeon, Blue-winged Teal, Greater & Lesser Scaup, Wood Ducks, Hooded Merganser, Glaucous-winged and Short-billed Gulls (Mew), American Bittern, Green Heron, White-faced Ibis, Sora, Virginia & Black Rail, Burrowing Owl, Golden Eagle, Yellow-shafted Flicker, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Lincoln & Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Orange-crowned & Townsend's Warblers, Great-tailed Grackle & Tricolored Blackbirds. ▲

Dover Park and It's Significant Breeding Colonies

Black-crowned Night Herons, Snowy Egrets, and Cattle Egrets

Photographs and Article by Ron Brown



BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT HERONS

Dover Park is a public park in Fairfield, off the main street of 800 East Travis Boulevard, with a picnic gazebo, children's play areas, ponds and a large grassy area. While it is considered by some to be in a "difficult" area, it is host to these wonderful and ecologically important, bird colonies.

HISTORY OF THE COLONY

Dover Park was first reported to the Heron & Egret Project (HEP) of Audubon Canyon Ranch (ACR) in 2015 and the first data collected was in 2016. In 2016 Joanne Castro noted "It was far more difficult to monitor nesting egrets than anticipated!!!! But I truly enjoyed the project with the help of David Reichel, neighbors of Dover Park, and some unusual park patrons who loved to help me count the white birds. The city of Fairfield has an outstanding Park Maintenance worker and one neighbor took birds to the rescue center in Cordelia."

This year, San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory (SFBBO) took over administration of the HEP project and will now be collecting data throughout the whole San Francisco Bay Area.

By the way, SFBBO is looking for volunteers for this site. Please check their website for more info.

There were 2 main colony trees (conifers) until the winter storms of 2022, the most prominent of the nesting trees next to the road and gazebo blew over onto Flamingo Rd and was removed. In the breeding season of 2023 there were to be nests in 17 different trees, a mix of deciduous and coniferous trees spread throughout the park.

THE BIRDS

Black-crowned Night Herons: They are a striking contrast to the Egrets, with dark colors, red eyes and stocky build. Adults are light-gray with defined black backs crowns. Their chicks (seen on the next page, in the background of the Snowy Egret nest and under the nest tree) are very different in plumage from the adults. The brown color and streaking is common in many bird chicks and excellent camouflage. The juveniles retain this difference and can be difficult for new birders to ID in the field.

Snowy Egrets: They usually arrive around Late March to early April and are quite incredible to be around when courtship, pairing, and nest building is in full force. The sound that emanates from these elegant birds is indescribable and not what you would expect — it is chaos and mayhem when the Black Crowned Night Herons join the annual bacchanal.



SNOWY EGRETS & THEIR CHICKS & YOUNG BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT HERONS

In May, many of the chicks are on the ground. They have been pushed out of the nest by siblings or it is time for them to explore outside the nest. If they are too small they perish, larger chicks attempt to return to the nest. Chicks are taken to rescue centers, so many that they may not have space to take care of them. At times it is difficult to witness “survival of the fittest” in action.



SNOWY EGRETS CHICKS WITH YOUNG BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT HERONS

Cattle Egrets: Before the loss of the main nesting tree near the road, their nests were hard to find amongst the mass of Heron and Egret nests. They relocated to Pepper trees near their old nesting tree.

The photo shows the cinnamon breeding plumage and they also have a dramatic color change in their beak to bright red. They are found feeding around cattle and without their breeding plumage look a bit like stocky Snowy Egrets.



CATTLE EGRET

In Britain and Europe, it is known as the Buff-backed Heron, in reference to the color of its breeding plumes; but in many languages it is simply called Cow Crane, Cow Heron, or Cow Bird”. Indeed, this unusual bird has provided a rare opportunity for comparative worldwide studies of its population dynamics and its interactions with native colonial waterbirds, as well as with people.

I haven’t seen any Cattle Egrets outside of the breeding season in Napa, Sonoma or Marin counties and am also unfamiliar with any nesting sites in mainland Marin County. Solano County has this site, and there is a colony similar to Dover Park in Santa Rosa, at West 9th Street. *With climate change and continued human manipulation of the environment it will be interesting to see where the expansion of this bird’s range in North America ends.*

NSAS has several teams monitoring Heron Rookeries in our area.

- **Robin Leong & Wally Neville** have monitored Mare Island for 25+ years, and this year **Karina Garcia** and **Omar Shishani** will take over.
- **Wendy Cole** monitors a colony in St. Helena.
- **Tom Slyker** has been monitoring the Gold Hill Rookery in Cordelia that has more than 200 nests, and **Karina Garcia**, and **Cheryl Reynolds** will be joining him this year.
- **Claudia Zinn and her husband Jeff**, monitored the Lake Hennessey Colony last year.

If you’d like to join a team, please let us know. ▲

NSAS Field Trip: Exploring the Vast Wildlife Refuges of the Sacramento Valley

by Bruce Thomsen / trip coordinated by Wendy Cole



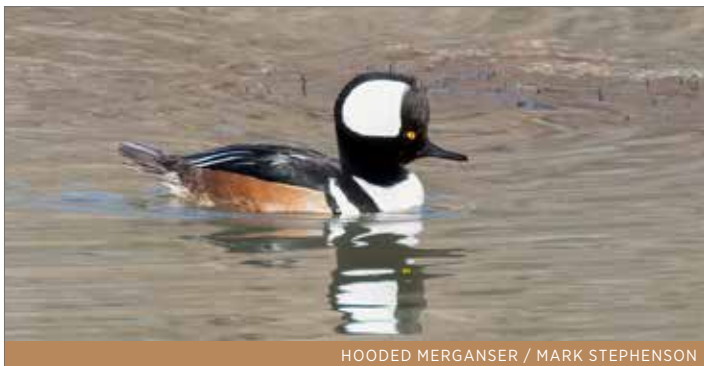
GREATER EGRET / MARK STEPHENSON

On Saturday, February 3, 2024, 18 NSAS members visited the Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge and drove the auto loop with Wildlife Biologist, Cliff Feldheim from Duck's Unlimited, observing 64 species of waterfowl, passerines and raptors.

Cliff was a great leader and told us of the work Ducks Unlimited is doing to preserve waterfowl habitat. He also spoke about their most recent research project that tracks duck migration with radio transmitters to increase their knowledge about when and where ducks travel during the Spring and Fall migration cycle. They have learned about many never before known locations where ducks stopover during their migration, to replenish their food supply.

Hopefully this data will help to inform Ducks Unlimited and other conservation organizations where to continue to set aside additional preserves to support ducks.

Next, we visited Colusa NWR with Amy McDonald from Sacramento Audubon, and observed many ducks and geese from the fantastic Waterfowl Observation Platform. While driving the auto loop, we observed a total of 67 species!



HOODED MERGANSER / MARK STEPHENSON



WHITE-FACED IBIS / BECKY MATSUBARA / WIKIMEDIA

After a delicious dinner at Granzella's Restaurant replenishing our energies, we continued on to **Gray Lodge Wildlife Area** on Sunday morning. Despite the driving rain storm, we took the Gray Lodge Wildlife auto loop, culminating in scope views of a perched Peregrine Falcon from the sanctuary of the duck blind. Unbelievably, we were able to observe 68 species in the rain!

Several cars continued on South looking for Tundra Swans along North Pennington Road. Although our Chapter President led us on a wild swan (goose) chase while attempting to reach a pinned eBird location. This exciting route included diversions deep into an off-limits hunting zone, and a dead end on Craig Rd. where gates blocked the road, a mere 300 hundred yards from a flock of the elusive Swans. For the few brave souls who persevered, we finally located three large flocks, totaling well over 200 Tundra Swans along lower Pennington Road, West of Live Oak.

Our weekend trip tallied 89 species. Highlights included:

- **Sac NWR:** Blue-wing Teal, Ring-necked Ducks, Hooded Mergansers, Ring-necked Pheasants, 7 Bald Eagles and massive flocks of 5000+ Snow Geese.
- **Colusa:** 600+ White-faced Ibis feeding in flooded fields; sensational views of ducks and a large flock of incredibly cute Ross's Geese at the Colusa Viewing Platform, and views of Wilson's Snipe, Long-billed Curlew, Great-horned & Barn Owls.
- **Gray Lodge:** Sandhill Cranes, Hooded Mergansers, Cinnamon Teal, a colorful Green Heron, stunning views of Western Meadowlarks and Pipits along the roadside, plus a family of Bald Eagles on a thrilling duck hunt. ▲



NORTHERN SHOVELER / MARK STEPHENSON



TUNRA SWANS / MARK STEPHENSON



GREEN HERON / MARK STEPHENSON



WESTERN MEADOWLARK / MARK STEPHENSON

What Birds Mean to Us

poem adapted by Pam Condos



GREAT EGRET / MIKE BAIRD / WIKIMEDIA

Watching birds can make us infinitely more observant of all that's around us – a wonderful way to be at one with the natural world!

Birds represent resilience and rugged independence.

Many fly thousands of miles each year, braving the elements with their tiny bodies.

Not all survive, but they continue!

Birds are a promise.
Life in all its splendor goes on.
They embody hope!

Birds provide us with glorious soundtracks for our lives.
They are our constant, a belief in a new day coming!

Birds represent flight and height—the majesty of air;
the expanse of sky!

They represent freedom!





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Consider Joining Solano Together & Protect Our Beautiful Region

Since time immemorial, the Patwin and Miwok people stewarded the lands of what is now known as eastern Solano County. This area is now known for its vibrant agricultural industry, iconic grasslands, sustainable wind power, and unique delta habitats.

Montezuma Hills and surrounding areas have been home to highly productive dryland farms and rare vernal pool habitats for generations. Farmers and ranchers have adapted to worsening drought and innovated with dryland farming and regenerative agriculture practices, even in the face of growing climate hazards.

This special place is now threatened by a proposed sprawl development in the region.

We are a group of concerned residents, leaders, and organizations who came together to form Solano Together, a coalition that envisions a better future for our region that focuses development into **existing** cities and strengthens our agricultural industry.

Our work is driven by an alternative vision for Solano County in the face of Flannery Associates' claims about California Forever's benefits—our vision is guided by local voices and perspectives.

As a science and fact-based coalition, Solano Together will provide the public, voters, and decision-makers, with **accurate information** on the impacts of California Forever & unite around a shared vision for the future. www.solanotogether.org

NSAS Annual Elections are coming up in May!

The four NSAS Executive Committee Board Positions which are elected or reelected annually are **President, Vice President, Secretary** and **Treasurer**. *Any member can submit their name for any of these positions.* **Tom Slyker**, who has done an outstanding job as Vice-President for the past 4 years, **will be stepping down** to devote his time to Citizen Science projects. **Consequently, we are looking for someone to fill our Vice President position.**

The following is a brief summary of the duties of each as stated in our By-Laws:

- **President:** President of NSAS, Chairman of the Board, and an ex-officio member of all committees.
- **Vice President:** Assist the President in the performance of duties, and in the absence of the President, the Vice President shall preside at any meetings.
- **Secretary:** Keeps a record of all proceedings of the Board and of NSAS, and shall conduct such correspondence of NSAS as the President or Board may direct.
- **Treasurer:** Shall have custody of all of NSAS's funds and shall disburse these funds as directed by the Board. The Treasurer shall provide financial statement to the Board at their regular meeting or as requested.

In addition, we are hoping to fill the following Board appointed positions for the coming year:

- **Conservation Advocacy:** This position stays in touch with local conservation issues and reports to our membership on positive action we can take to support habitat preservation.
- **Education Chair:** This position helps us to organize our School and Community Education activities.
- **Communications Chair:** This position entails writing short articles for our Newsletter and promoting our activities to local news organizations or on social media.
- **Director:** Becoming a Director is a great way for you or a friend to “get your feet wet” with Board activities. Please let us know if you have the time and energy to join our Board and we will submit your name for approval. ▲

If you are interested in nominating yourself or another member for any of these positions: *please contact us by April 15th at: 44starlight@sbcglobal.net* and include “**NSAS Nominations**” in the subject line. Thank you.