



# The Sandpiper

September 2023



Redwood Region Audubon Society

[www.rras.org](http://www.rras.org)



A male and female Ruff, on migration through the Netherlands in May.  
Photo by Adri Hoogendijk



Yvonne Verkuil - April 2004,  
releasing freshly color-banded Ruffs.  
Photo by Jan Wijmenga

Join us on Thursday, September 21, at 7:00 p.m., in person or on Zoom, for a program on:

## Ruffs — the Ephemeral Shorebird, by Yvonne Verkuil

Ruffs are mostly known for their extravagant looks, with the males sporting colorful ruffs and tufts in unique combinations of patterns and colors. Their displays on the mating grounds are a spectacular sight. In this talk, Yvonne will focus on the more hidden complexity of their mating system, with unexpected male and female roles which are equally spectacular. The talk will also touch on the capacity of Ruffs to react to changes in their environments. They appear quickly in

areas where conditions are right (again). This has led to apparent flexible usage of migration routes through Europe and large-scale shifts of breeding grounds in Scandinavia and Russia in the last decades.

Yvonne Verkuil is a Dutch ecologist, based near Humboldt Bay since 2022, with a lifelong passion for shorebirds. She did her masters research on Red Knots migrating through Western Europe and on the shorebird community of the Sivash, Ukraine. She received her PhD in Biology in 2010 at the University of Groningen based on her studies of Ruffs, and did postdoctoral work on *rufa* Red Knots at the Royal Ontario Museum in Canada. The past decade she continued her population genetics research on shorebirds and developed methodology

the trip leader at the end of South I Street (Klopp Lake) for easy-to-walk trails and a beautiful view of Humboldt Bay. Fall is an incredible time to bird at the marsh, where you might get to see Brown Pelicans diving for fish, shorebird murmurations over the bay, the fascinating bill diversity of Pacific Coast shorebirds, as well as

for DNA-barcoding bird diets. Since 2008 she dedicates her free time to promoting shorebird conservation and research, mostly through her roles as chair (until 2020) of the International Wader Study Group and as journal editor of *Wader Study*. She currently works (remotely) for the University of Groningen in the Netherlands and does fieldwork on breeding Pied Avocets with the Lowland Ecology Network.

The live program is held at Six Rivers Masonic Lodge, 251 Bayside Road, Arcata. It will be simultaneously Zoomed—go to [rras.org](http://rras.org) for the link. Drinks and goodies will be served at 7:00 p.m., the program begins at 7:30.

### Looking Ahead ...

#### Fall Programs Now on Third Thursday of the Month

Everyone is welcome at our monthly meetings, where we catch up with friends and make new ones, and share in the knowledge, insights, and spirit of adventure of featured speakers. The subject is birds, but there is so much to hear about the faraway (and sometimes local) places they inhabit, the latest research into their behaviors, how human activity affects them, how to hone your birding skills, and more. We meet in person at 7:00 p.m. at Six Rivers Masonic Lodge in Arcata and on Zoom.

The season kicks off on September 21 with Yvonne Verkuil, on Ruffs and Reeves, as described in the accompanying article.

October 19: Mike Graybill (former Manager of South Slough National Estuarine Reserve in Coos Bay, Oregon) fills us in on a timely topic, the pros and cons of offshore wind development.

November 16: Andrea Tuttle, whose professional career has focused on forestry and climate policy, presents a story of ecological recovery in the New Zealand Sub-Arctic.

December 21: Roy Lowe (former HSU Student and Manager of Oregon Coast NWR Complex) shares his experiences birding in Brazil.

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### RRAS FIELD TRIPS IN SEPTEMBER

Every Saturday, 8:30-11am. Join Redwood Region Audubon Society for a free guided field trip with an experienced birder at the Arcata Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary, one of the best birding spots in our area and host to a great diversity of migratory and overwintering species. Bring binoculars and scope if you have either and meet

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## President's Column

*By Gail Kenny*

Our public speaker programs are starting up again on the third Thursday of the month.

The first one this fall is September 21 with Yvonne Verkuil, Shorebird Researcher on Ruffs and Reeves. This is good timing for fall shorebird migration. We occasionally have the rare Ruff visit our area. See the announcement on the first page of this newsletter for more information.

The 8th Annual Tim McKay Birdathon is scheduled for October 1-10. This annual fundraiser supports both the North Coast Environmental Center (NEC) and the Redwood Region Audubon Society. Tim McKay was a long-term Executive Director of the NEC, an avid birder, and a major supporter of RRAS. I have fond memories of attending a RRAS field trip led by Tim to a pond near the Klamath River mouth where we had good looks at Wood Ducks. This is a major fundraiser for RRAS that directly supports our general fund. The general fund allows us to publish the *Sandpiper* eleven times a year, supports our operating expenses such as our Zoom account and InDesign software, allows us to pay legal fees for our conservation activities, goes towards annual scholarships supporting student research projects, and

much more! We invite you to participate in the Birdathon by sponsoring your own team for a big day of birding between October 1 and 10. See Gary Friedrichsen's article on the next page of this newsletter for all the details.

I'm pleased to report that my resident Barn Swallow pair successfully hatched a first brood of five chicks, with three that survived to fledging. They have a second brood of four chicks still in the nest as of August 10. So much better than last year when they were unsuccessful raising any chicks. In late June my family and I enjoyed watching three juvenile Peregrine Falcons on Trinidad Head flying around harassing each other putting on quite the show for the humans.



Fledgling Barn Swallows from summer's first brood  
Photo by Gail Kenny

Your membership in Redwood Region Audubon supports our field trips, programs, education, and conservation efforts. You may also join us online at [www.rras.org](http://www.rras.org) and click the JOIN US button. We have two different types of memberships:

- **Local membership** For just \$15 a year you will receive *EcoNews*, with the *Sandpiper* inserted. To join locally mail a check for \$15 made out to RRAS with your name, address, and email address to:  
Redwood Region Audubon Society  
PO Box 1054, Eureka, CA 95502
- **National membership** Join National Audubon and receive *EcoNews* with the *Sandpiper* inserted as well as *Audubon* magazine. Please use our Chapter Code C24 so that we receive our share of your membership.

National Membership Application:

My check for \$20 is enclosed. (Introductory Offer)

Name:.....

Address:.....

City:..... State:..... Zip:.....

Email:.....

Local Chapter Code: C24

Mail form and check to:

National Audubon Society

Attn: Donations

225 Varick Street, 7th Floor

New York, NY 10014



## FIELD TRIPS CONTINUED

migratory terrestrial species returning for the winter.

*Trip leaders for September:* **September 2**, Dan Greaney ~ **September 9**, Gary Friedrichsen ~ **September 16**, Bill Rodstrom ~ **September 23**, Larry Karsteadt ~ **September 30**, Kathryn Wendel

### More Field Trips

Tuesday, Sept 5, **6-7:30pm**. Bike birding is back! Join trip leader Janelle Chojnacki for another round of bikes, birds, and brews, this time starting and ending at the Local Cider Bar in Arcata. Meet across the street on the sidewalk in front of the North Coast Co-op and we'll hop on our bikes and ride around Arcata's V Street Loop

looking for grassland songbirds and shorebirds, raptors hunting in the area, and anything else that catches our eyes. The ride will be smooth and slow and note that we will be returning to the Cider Bar close to sunset, so bike lights are encouraged.

Sunday, Sept 17, 9-11am. Meet Ralph Bucher at the foot of Del Norte Street for a walk along the Eureka waterfront, a relatively urban trail that offers the potential to observe species abundance and diversity comparable to many more remote locations. This walk is on a flat, paved trail that is **wheelchair accessible**. Be on the lookout for cormorants, loons, grebes, and even otters diving for their meals in the bay alongside the trail. Email Ralph to sign up at [thebook\[at\]reninet.com](mailto:thebook[at]reninet.com).

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## 8th Annual Tim McKay Birdathon

October 1 – 10, 2023

Supporting the Northcoast Environmental Center and Redwood Region Audubon Society

By Gary Friedrichsen

Join in the fun and support two organizations that have the communities' back when it comes to environmental threats to our wildlife and their homes. Go birding for a day, keep records of your species list, and ask your friends and relatives to help you by contributing a nickel or more per species. That's a BIRDATHON! We normally hold this event in the spring, but both the NEC and RRAS have busy schedules at that time of year so we are shifting to a Fall Birdathon and hope that it fits the participants and our organizations better. (I don't think the birds mind either way!)

As always, this year's Birdathon offers three different categories in which you can participate.

- 1) **Standard 24-hour "Big Day" style outings:** For this category teams of two or more will spend an entire day in the field searching for as many bird species as possible. Each team member will be responsible for obtaining their own pledges for their team, and the team leader will coordinate the team's effort to collect pledges and get them to the NEC.
- 2) **Six-hour blitz:** This category is for those teams or individuals who want to limit their search time to six hours. In this group, members select one day during the count period to spend six continuous hours finding birds, either traveling in a vehicle, on a bicycle, walking, or being stationary. As above, team leaders or individuals will have the responsibility to collect pledges



Photo by Alan Peterson, courtesy of Godwit Days

and turn them into the contact at the NEC.

- 3) **Youngest participants:** This category is meant for K-12 students and is limited to two hours in duration. Any group of students that form a team and complete the fundraising portion and then spend at least two hours identifying birds will qualify.



Log on to the NEC website ([www.yournec.org/birdathon](http://www.yournec.org/birdathon)) to register as an individual or as a team.

(Team names are encouraged but not mandatory.)

Remember, you can bird from your yard or choose a location to be stationary, and as long as you have donors signed up to support your efforts you can qualify as a team.

Besides raising much-needed funds for these two worthy organizations, the Birdathon honors an environmental hero of this area. This short bio of Tim was written by one of his good friends and fellow environmental stalwarts, Susie VanKirk:

“A lifelong Californian, Tim McKay—naturalist, writer, scholar, historian, environmental advocate—was executive director of the Northcoast Environmental Center in Arcata from 1976 until his death in 2006. Under his leadership, the NEC became an influential organization in regional campaigns for wilderness, ancient forests, and salmon, and locally as the umbrella for every grassroots, “friends of” group that took up the gauntlet as advocates for their home watersheds.

He was a man of persistence and unswerving dedication to the ecological complexities and beauties of the natural world. McKay was gifted and had an insatiable drive for knowledge and a mind to match, allowing him to absorb, retain, and use information to successfully advocate for wild places, functioning ecosystems, and their associated fauna and flora. His ability with words, his scholarship, his passion, and an uncanny political savvy transformed a fledgling group of the early environmental movement into a force to be reckoned with, and one that has left its mark across the regional landscape. Often under personal attack, including threatening phone calls, McKay responded as a man confident in his position on the issues, always following his favorite rule-to-live-by: “Endless pressure; Endlessly applied.”

### FIELD TRIPS, CONTINUED

Saturday, Sept 23, 9-11am. Wigi Wetlands Volunteer Workday. Help restore a section of the bay trail behind Bayshore Mall. Bring water and gloves, we provide tools and snacks. Contact Jeremy Cashen at [Jeremy.cashen@yahoo.com](mailto:Jeremy.cashen@yahoo.com) or 214-605-7368 for more information.

Saturday, Sept 23. **Pelagic Birding Trip.** Godwit Days Bird Festival is pleased to offer one of the first pelagic birding trips in several years to Eel River Canyon aboard the U.S. Coast Guard ship *Stellar Sunrise*. Join leaders Kathryn Wendel,

Gary Friedrichsen, and Rob Fowler for a chance to see Marbled Murrelets, Rhinoceros Auklets, Black-footed Albatross, and many more! To sign up, see the full announcement in this issue of the *Sandpiper*.

Saturday, Sept 30, 8:30-noon. Fernbridge/Singley Gravel Bar with Ken Burton. Large numbers of fall migrants use the lush, riparian forests of the Eel River estuary as a refueling stop. Contingent on access conditions, we'll walk downriver from Fernbridge, checking the alder, cottonwood, and

willow patches for warblers, vireos, and other passerines and the river itself for shorebirds and waterfowl. This will be a physically demanding outing; be prepared to walk five miles on rough terrain. Meet at the end of Depot St. in Fernbridge (40.615424, -124.200524) for carpooling to the site; contact Ken ([shrikethree@gmail.com](mailto:shrikethree@gmail.com)) with your location at least 24 hours prior if you want to carpool to Fernbridge.

## Join Us for a Pelagic Birding Trip – September 23!

Godwit Days Bird Festival is pleased to offer one of the first pelagic birding trips in several years to Eel River Canyon aboard the *Stellar Sunrise*, a U.S. Coast Guard certified vessel with 360-degree viewing and a bathroom facility. Fall

is an excellent time of year for seabird viewing in Humboldt waters, where we have good chances of seeing Marbled Murrelets, jaegers, Rhinoceros Auklets, Northern Fulmars, various species of shearwaters and storm-petrels, Black-footed Albatross, and the possibility for many more! Join leaders Kathryn Wendel, Gary Friedrichsen, and

Rob Fowler on Saturday, September 23, for this eight-hour trip, weather and ocean conditions permitting. Bring lunch, plenty of water, sunscreen, and binoculars. Cameras welcome, but no spotting scopes permitted. Reservations required, please visit [godwitdays.org](http://godwitdays.org) to sign up. Cost: \$150/person.

## The Prince of Birds

### White-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*)

By CJ Ralph

In residential Eureka a noticeable bird song is the clear, whistled *zurrr zee zee zee-zur-zee* (as Ken Burton interpreted it) of the White-crowned Sparrow. Its slim and elegant physique and striking black and white crown to me define the “prince of birds.”

For a few weeks after hatching, the young White-crowns are totally different from the parents, having striped breasts and crowns like finches. For winter they molt this juvenile plumage into the familiar clear breast and a brown and grey crown. These young White-crowns can be confused with Golden-crowned Sparrows. The latter appear plumper, and the crown stripes are diffuse, as opposed to the White-crowns’ clean stripes. In their first spring these young birds replace all their feathers except scattered brown feathers amongst the black stripes of the crown. Therefore, they are identifiable to their flock mates as young birds, perhaps affording them some special treatment from adults. The molt for their second spring brings the full adult plumage.

White-crowns are common breeders in the mountainous West, the taiga of the far north, and the cool Pacific Coast. You won’t find them breeding in the hot interior! Our local breeding White-crowns are of two subspecies, the resident *nuttalli*, which breeds from here south, and the migratory *pugetensis*, which



Nuttall's White-crowned Sparrow at Lanphere Dunes.

Painting by David Sibley

breeds from here north to Puget Sound. Both have yellow bills, and their plumage is indistinguishable from each other. At our banding station, the Humboldt Bay Bird Observatory, on the cusp of the two ranges, we catch what is likely breeding *nuttalli*,

because some individuals are captured all year. We also have an influx of new birds in the fall and winter that we presume are *pugetensis* from farther north, as well as *gambelli*, a highly migratory, pink-billed subspecies.

The White-crowned Sparrow has been considered the “lab rat” of ornithology because of the ease of keeping it in captivity. This has spawned abundant scientific discovery with easily thousands of papers on its song, migration, and behavior. Young male birds learn their song dialect from their dads. Within Humboldt County are probably upwards of a dozen, quite separable, song dialects. These can vary over just a few miles. Birds singing at Clam Beach can be recognized as different from those at Lanphere Dunes, and very different from those at higher elevations near Horse Mountain. At Lanphere Dunes, our birds were studied by the late Luis Baptista from the California Academy of Sciences, who found we have bilingual and trilingual individuals, and even one who thought he was a Song Sparrow!

White-crowns are part of the mixed-species flocks of sparrows that we all enjoy as they visit us in the colder months. These flocks are stable through most of the winter, as individuals are site-faithful, and rarely drift off to a different group. As you see them at your feeder or along the path, think of the drama, adventure, and intrigue that their lives encompass.



## DID YOU KNOW?

From the CatBird Committee

Municipalities around the country are starting to treat cats and dogs alike. In response to issues with free-roaming dogs and cats, the town of Audubon, Iowa, updated the city code to require pet owners to keep their animals, including cats, on a leash. The city council even went so far as to make live traps available to city residents to catch and remove problem cats! Birds and other small wildlife will benefit from this action, an example to other cities.

Source: Audubon County Advocate Journal

## News of the Month: Reading Ideas

Contributed by Andrea Tuttle

**A bird book to move you.** So poignant you have to take a breath. Poetry woven with biology, “*The Seabird's Cry: The Lives and Loves of the Planet's Great Ocean Voyagers*,” by Adam Nicolson relates the solitary lives of puffins, kittiwakes, fulmars, and others at sea, punctuated by their drive to breed on rocky crags, cliffs, and shores. Educational, fascinating, and an emotional read.

**Who's the wise one?** “*What an Owl Knows*,” by naturalist Jennifer Ackerman is a fun book crammed with details on owls, newly discovered through use of cameras, drones, DNA, and sensors. An informative narrative on the private lives and survival strategies of these shy and charismatic birds.