



The Sandpiper

May 2023



Redwood Region Audubon Society

www.rras.org



Jesse Conklin with a male Bar-tailed Godwit captured in Nome, Alaska, on June 25, 2009. Photo by Murray Potter.

Please join Redwood Region Audubon Society on Wednesday, May 17, at 7:30 p.m. for a program by Dr. Jesse Conklin entitled

Bar-tailed Godwits: A Personal History of Excessive Flying

In this talk, Jesse will discuss how his own career in ornithology, including eighteen years of research on Alaska-breeding Bar-tailed Godwits, has been inextricably entwined with the quest to understand just how far a bird can fly. Each year, these birds make a round-trip of more than 30,000 kilometers between Alaska and their nonbreeding areas in New Zealand and Australia. Jesse will discuss how our understanding of the godwits' incredible trans-Pacific migration has

evolved over time with advancements in tracking technology, and how much we still don't know.

Jesse grew up in Southern California and received a BSc in Graphic Design from San Jose State University in 1990. After learning that you could theoretically get paid to look at birds, he threw away that career and came to Humboldt State University, where he received an MSc in Wildlife in 2005, studying Dunlin in Humboldt Bay. Continuing to study migratory shorebirds, he has worked extensively in Alaska, received a PhD in Ecology from Massey University in New Zealand in 2012, and did ten years of postdoctoral research while based in the Netherlands. He has been Editor-in-Chief of the ornithological journal *Wader Study* since 2015. Now an independent researcher focusing on migration behavior and population genetics of shorebirds, Jesse recently moved back to Humboldt County, because it is just nicer than Europe.

The live program will be held at the Six Rivers Masonic Lodge, 251 Bayside Road, Arcata. It will be simultaneously zoomed – please see RRAS.org for the Zoom link. Hot drinks and goodies will be served at 7 p.m., so bring a mug to enjoy shade-grown coffee. Please come fragrance-free.



A male and female Bar-tailed Godwit depart on northward migration from the Manawatu River estuary, New Zealand, on March 15, 2015. Photo by Jesse Conklin.

RRAS FIELD TRIPS IN MAY

Saturday May 6 – 8:30-11am. Join RRAS for a free guided field trip at the Arcata Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary. Bring your binoculars and scope if you have them, and meet trip leader Bob Battagin at the end of South I Street (Klopp Lake) for easy-to-walk trails, a beautiful view of Humboldt Bay, and the opportunity to hear and see a diverse range of shorebirds, migratory songbirds and raptors, and resident birds likely engaging in breeding activities. Reservations not required.

Saturday May 13 – 8:30-11am. Free guided field trip at Arcata Marsh with trip leader Bill Rodstrom. Meet at the end of South I Street (Klopp Lake).

Sunday May 14 – 9-11am. Join trip leader Ralph Bucher for a walk at the Humboldt Bay National Wildlife Refuge. This two-mile walk is along a wide, flat, gravel-packed trail easily accessible on foot. Just outside of town, this refuge offers astounding and easy access to tidally influenced habitats including mudflats, riparian vegetation, conifers, and bay, which host a variety of geese, raptors, shorebirds, and waders. Email Ralph to sign up for this field trip at [thebook\[at\]reninet.com](mailto:thebook@reninet.com).

Sunday, May 14 – 9-11am. What better way to celebrate Mother's Day than with a **Women and Girls Bird Walk!** Join us for a stroll along the Blue Lake levee and maybe through the cottonwoods, where we will likely hear some vocal species like kingfishers and killdeer; see other species that enjoy this productive riparian area, including sparrows, finches, corvids, raptors, ducks, and wrens; and we may be able to observe the fledglings of some of the early nesters as well! Trip leader for this walk is TBD. Meet in the parking area on the south side of the Hatchery Road bridge.

Saturday May 20 – 8:30-11am. Free guided field trip at Arcata Marsh with trip leader Larry Karsteadt. Meet at the end of South I Street (Klopp Lake).

Sunday May 21 – 9-11am. For a **wheelchair accessible** walk along the Eureka shoreline, join trip leader Ralph Bucher at the foot of Del Norte St. An active Osprey nest, along with waterbirds, can be viewed from the pier. Email Ralph to sign up for this field trip at [thebook\[at\]reninet.com](mailto:thebook@reninet.com).

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RRAS FIELD TRIPS IN MAY CONTINUED

Saturday May 27 – 9-11am. Wigi Wetlands Volunteer Workday. Help create bird-friendly native habitat and restore a section of the bay trail behind Bayshore Mall. We provide tools and snacks. Please bring your own water and gloves. Contact Jeremy Cashen at jeremy.cashen@yahoo.com or 214-605-7368 for more information.

Saturday May 27 – 8:30-10:30am. Join RRAS in **Southern Humboldt** on the fourth Saturday of every month at Tooby Park, one mile west of Garberville on Sprowl Creek Road. These walks will be easy walking lasting 2-3 hours each. Start time is variable so please text or call Ann at 707-296-8720 for start time each month. Heavy rain cancels.



President's Column

By Gail Kenny

Redwood Region Audubon Society has a long history of involvement with the Arcata Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary (AMWS). We supported its creation and have led guided walks there almost every Saturday since 1986. It is a fabulous place to see a large variety of birds and other wildlife. But it sometimes suffers from too much human activity.

In the last year, there have been two river otter deaths from being hit by vehicles inside the sanctuary, the most recent on March 24, 2023. After the first otter fatality, there were calls for the City of Arcata to take action to slow vehicles down in the Marsh. The posted speed limit is 15 miles per hour, but there is not much enforcement. The Friends of the Arcata Marsh (FOAM) have requested that more speed bumps be placed on the roads, especially near the known otter crossings, and to have this expedited. They have also posted new signs and succeeded in getting the city to close I Street overnight.

Accidents resulting in injury or death to wildlife due to human activity should be rare, particularly within a designated wildlife sanctuary. These otter fatalities occurred as a result of speeding and recklessness reflective of a pattern of unacceptable behavior that the City of Arcata has been unable to bring into compliance with posted speed limits. This also indicates that the management of the AMWS needs to change to better protect wildlife.

RRAS is adamant that, as a temporary emergency action, I Street should be closed to all private vehicles until effective measures

Sunday May 28 – 9-11am. Join two Humboldt Wildlife graduate students studying rangeland birds for this grassland bird-centered walk along the V Street loop in Arcata. Maddie Ybarra and Ximena Moura will focus on sparrows, finches, and other grassland songbirds during an easy-to-walk stroll along the restored wetlands in southern Arcata, where raptors, waterfowl, and shorebirds will likely also be present. Meet at the small parking area on Old Samoa Road, west of Pacheco Road.

are in place to significantly reduce the risk of otter fatalities from vehicles. You can help by making your opinions known to City of Arcata representatives, including City Council Mayor Sarah Schaefer, sschaefer@cityofarcata.org; Arcata City Manager Karen Diemer, citymgr@cityofarcata.org; and Arcata Police Department Chief Brian Ahern, 707-822-2428.



Otter crossing at Arcata Marsh
Photo by Makana Kiakuna

On another note, we would like to heartfully thank outgoing *Sandpiper* Editor Gisèle Albertine for her excellent work on the *Sandpiper* newsletter over the past three years. She will be missed! The April 2023 issue was the last issue she edited, another information-packed edition testifying to the high standards Gisèle has set.

Monday, May 29 – 8am-noonish. Spend the morning with us exploring the newly restored **Ocean Ranch Unit** of the Eel River Wildlife Area. We'll see how well the area is supporting birds that breed in our local estuarine habitats. With luck, we may see Red-necked Phalarope, White-faced Ibis, and/or Purple Martin. Be prepared for 2-3 miles of easy walking. Meet leader Ken Burton at the parking area off Table Bluff Road (40.691833, -124.273462). If you want to carpool to the location, contact Ken (shrikethree@gmail.com) with your address.

A Refuge for All

Appreciating Birds at Famed Arcata Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary with the Redwood Region Audubon Society, by Jessie Bunkley

At 8:30 on a chilly, winter morning, a group of about a dozen people gather at Arcata Marsh for a guided walk to identify and admire the many bird species that use the renowned wastewater treatment facility as habitat. The Redwood Region Audubon Society has offered these walks on traditional Wiyot lands every Saturday since 1986.



Judi Brown has found community at the walks, which she started regularly attending two years ago after moving to the area. “You can talk about a subject that you all love and it takes you away from the cares of the world,” she says. “You can stand in any one place at Arcata Marsh and feel happy,” she adds with a laugh.

Today, the group comprises birders of all skill levels, and Gary Friedrichsen, a local biologist, leads the way. As we meander through the wetlands, everyone scans the water, naked trees, and gray sky. Winter’s grip is firm, but colorful hats and jackets keep the chill at bay. We stop at the edge of a pond and Gary sets up a spotting scope. Dunlins, Dowitchers, Least and Western Sandpipers all busily probe the mud bank for invertebrates. Participants discuss plumage, leg color, and behavior, pulling field guides from coat pockets to make careful notes in the margins. Buffleheads, Willets, Black-crowned Night Herons, Fox Sparrows — as penciled lists grow longer the noise of the



highway is momentarily eclipsed by the high and wild calls of Aleutian Cackling Geese.

I ask Gary what inspires him to be a walk leader and he explains his gratitude for the birding mentors in his life, Dr. Stan Harris and Ron LeValley. “Being a part of Audubon allows me to do something on behalf of the community and give back.” Later, as people say their goodbyes and express their thanks, it is clear that the cycle of inspiration continues.

Thick-billed Fox Sparrow

by Gary Bloomfield

The Fox Sparrow is a familiar winter visitor to our area but that is only half of the story of this large and variable sparrow in the Klamath Bioregion. This species complex is comprised of four distinct population groups; the Red Fox Sparrow, a boreal breeder and eastern winter bird; the Slate-colored Fox Sparrow, breeding primarily in the Rocky Mountains; the Sooty Fox Sparrow, our common Pacific coast winter form that breeds from northwest Washington up the coast to the Aleutian Islands; and, finally, the Thick-billed Fox Sparrow, that winters in southern California to Baja California and breeds in the mountains of Oregon and California, including our local Klamath Mountains.

A good look at this bird reveals some obvious differences between it and the Sooty form. Most apparent are the gray head, gray-brown back, and rusty wings and tail, all in contrast to the uniform chocolate brown upper parts of the Sooty group. An even closer look shows off the namesake massive bill, often blue-gray on the mandible, unlike the orange of other Fox Sparrows. Their feeding habits, however, are similar, so they can also be detected by their noisy kicking up of leaf litter deep under the cover of the brushy understory.

These birds begin to arrive by May, when the snow is gone from their mountain brushfield breeding grounds. It is then, through spring into early July, when



Thick-billed Fox Sparrow singing along South Fork Mountain
Photos by Gary Bloomfield

[Click here for songs and calls](#)

they can easily be found singing from atop higher vegetation in their territories. Their song is a rich and variable jumble of whistles, warbles, and trills that can be confused with that of the Green-tailed Towhee, another large sparrow that shares this breeding habitat. Their calls, however, are quite different, and most helpful in clinching an identification. The towhee utters a cat-like mew call, while the Thick-billed Fox Sparrow’s call is a high metallic “tink”, which is also very different from the Sooty Fox Sparrow’s moist and harsh “tchick”. As the summer progresses, their songs become less frequent, until finally by late August even their calls disappear as they quietly depart for their wintering grounds.

DID YOU KNOW?

From the Cat & Bird Safety Committee

Almost all wildlife has evolved with natural predators. In the case of North American birds, those predators can include hawks, snakes, coyotes, and other species. Over evolutionary time, bird species and the animals that eat them balance out and population numbers become stable. A 2020 study that collected GPS tracking data from cats in six countries found that cats are killing more birds and other wildlife than native predators would in areas where cats roam, creating out-of-balance mortality. The effect was described by the lead author as “a really intense rate of predation.” It’s important to keep in mind that cats are an invasive species. Thank you for keeping your cat indoors, on a leash, or otherwise contained!

Source: *Animal Conservation*, 3/11/2020, “The small home ranges and large local ecological impacts of pet cats.”

California Condor! Golden Eagle! New Species Added in This Year's CBC 2022-2023 Christmas Bird Count Results

Compiled by Gary Friedrichsen, Photos by Gary Bloomfield

Intrepid RRAS birders faced down complicated weather conditions to participate in Audubon's annual Christmas Bird Count (CBC). RRAS first participated in the CBC in 1947, while it was the 123rd year for the nation's longest-running community science bird project. Here are the



Downed tree in Redwood National Park



Driftwood obediently staying behind gate at the mouth of Redwood Creek.

reports from our five participating circles.

Tall Trees submitted by Ken Burton: The Tall Trees count was held the day after the January 4 windstorm. The highway had been cleared, but Bald Hills Road was closed beyond the Redwood Creek Trail turnoff, so two of our eight areas and large parts of many others were inaccessible. The day was stormy, with flooding and winds predicted, and some of our expected counters were without power and/or stuck in their homes behind fallen trees, so we had our smallest turnout and least effort ever. Almost every metric was well below normal. Count-week effort, however, was



White-fronted Geese on the Willow Creek CBC

extensive. No rare birds were found, but we did add count-week California Condor and Golden Eagle to our cumulative species list.

Willow Creek submitted by Birgitte Elbek: This year's CBC in Willow Creek took place on December 21, and we were finally blessed with reasonable weather after a couple of years with weather postponements and cancellation. The past two summers also saw significant wildfire activity, though much of it was low-intensity, and much of the forest canopy remains. Due to Covid complications, we had four teams in the field, rather than the usual five. Overall, it was a fairly slow day, with a total of 78 species. There were a couple of noteworthy items: Gary Lester located two Black-capped Chickadees at the mouth of Willow Creek, the same spot where four individuals were seen on the count in 2018. Also, Turkey Vultures have only rarely been seen up here in winter, but this year's teams saw fifteen individuals, three times the previous high count. Nine Greater White-fronted Geese were found, almost twice the previous high count of five. Ken Burton also noted that wetlands species overall seemed somewhat sparse.

Del Norte County submitted by Lucas Brug: 18 people did the Del Norte CBC on Sunday the 18th of December. It was mostly clear with little wind and very cold in the morning. We had 157 species, with the overwintering Sandhill Crane and two

White-faced Ibises the most unusual.

Arcata submitted by Tony Kurz: Arcata CBC ended up with 178 species! We had a total of 42 people participate this year. Weather was fantastic for the count: clear but a little on the cold side. A number of folks participated in nocturnal surveys, which paid off with an impressive eight species of owls! The count highlights included a continuing Nelson's Sparrow staked out at the Arcata Marsh. The offshore team spotted a flying Yellow-billed Loon pass by their boat. Other highlights included two Pacific Golden-Plovers, two Horned Larks, two Tropical Kingbirds, and a Tennessee Warbler. Our biggest misses were Clark's Grebe and Caspian Tern. Thanks to everyone for all their amazing effort.



Ross's Goose on Centerville CBC



Flood debris closing Cannibal Island Road

Centerville submitted by Sean McCallister: 41 observers participated in the 61st annual Centerville Beach to King Salmon CBC on January 3, with 179 species tallied. Highlights included two Trumpeter Swans, Cassin's Auklet, Snow Bunting, Tricolored Blackbird, Red Fox Sparrow, Orchard Oriole, Black-necked Stilt, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, two Barrow's Goldeneyes, and Ross's Goose, among others. As for weather conditions, we threaded a needle between storms and had very nice conditions with mostly clear skies, no precipitation, and quite manageable wind! Special thanks to Gary Friedrichsen and Hal Genger for attempting to get offshore on Gary's boat. Ocean conditions didn't quite allow for it, but fortunately David Fix managed to do a six-hour sea watch from Table Bluff that added some goodies to the list.



Ferruginous Hawk (Arcata CBC)

Northern Mockingbird (Arcata CBC)

River Otter (Arcata CBC)