

Open Letter To Chapters: Important Bird Areas (December 2000)

This letter is to introduce myself, and to inform you of recent developments within Audubon.

I'm Dan Cooper, a biologist with the National Audubon Society, working in Los Angeles. Recently, I have been asked to take over the Important Bird Area (IBA) program in California from Bob Barnes, who will devote more time to issues in the Kern River Valley.

Since California's IBA program began in 1996, over 60 IBA nominations have been received, which have resulted in nearly 50 sites being designated Global, Continental, or National IBAs. Chapter members spent long hours on the phone, gathering information from local experts and filling out nomination forms. Many of the sites are familiar to you, since they are also famous birding and bird research areas, including Big Morongo Canyon Preserve in Riverside County, the Farallon Islands off San Francisco, and Tule Lake/Lower Klamath National Wildlife Refuge in northeastern California. All are well-defined, defensible properties with an active constituency of conservationists working together to ensure these areas stay attractive and vital to birds.

A network of IBAs can become a cornerstone of Audubon's conservation activities throughout California. Aside from showcasing bird-friendly land use decisions, their identification will help guide conservation activities. Over the next few months, I will expand our IBA program to eventually include 150—200 sites that are representative of the diverse habitats in the state.

The certification of IBAs had been overseen by the American Bird Conservancy (ABC), the U.S. arm of Birdlife International, which, until recently worked closely with several states to identify IBAs. Since the ABC is no longer devoting attention to the program, Audubon-California will assume sole responsibility for the identification of new IBAs.

Over the next year, I will be meeting with experts on California bird distribution to plot the locations of future California IBAs, including David Fix, Don Roberson, and Mike San Miguel. The next step will be connecting sites with interested individuals - monitors and defenders of the IBAs. Please feel free to contact me directly for more information on nominating IBAs anywhere in California, or if you are involved in groups already working as stewards of particular sites.

I look forward to developing a first-rate IBA program in California. I can be reached at (323) 254-0252 or email at dcooper1@pacbell.com.

Sincerely,
Dan Cooper
Audubon-California, Los Angeles

Of Thatch, Cows, And Honkers (November 2000)

by David Fix

It's suspected by many who follow sports that a referee who knows he blew a call on the field of play may later 'slide' on another close call to right the wrong. The karmic essence of this wonderfully human phenomenon may underlie the management plan taken by California Department of Fish and Game at our Mad River Slough Wildlife Area. In the late 1980s, the North Coast Waterfowl Association, in cooperation with the Department, translocated Great Basin Canada Geese from western Nevada to coastal Humboldt County. The purpose of the transplant was ostensibly to provide an additional target animal for local hunters. The result has been widely viewed as unfavorable. Settling largely in visually exposed and unhuntable pasturelands, the geese found few enemies and have reproduced with vigor. Ganders are highly territorial, establishing a presence in pasture-edge and wetland which may deter breeding by other waterfowl species in the area. Further, they have been indicted by dairy ranchers for perceived or actual competition for grazing forage. This background is necessary to comprehend the decision of the Department to convert a large portion of the Mad River Slough Wildlife Area to year-round dairy cattle pasture.

Acting on the chance, matter-of-fact comment made by a friend that the Department had in fact planned to convert the site to pasture, I repeatedly phoned and ultimately met with a Department employee in 1999 to satisfy my curiosity about the project. What I found out alarmed, discouraged, and---most of all---outraged me. After an initial denial by the employee with whom I met that the 'politics' of dairy ranching propelled the project, an admission was made shortly thereafter that, yes, complaints by dairymen had caused the Department to decide to turn our most valuable local raptor habitat into a little more cattle pasture. I examined maps, photos, and plans for the area and found that, under the cheerful guise of 'wildlife habitat enhancement', the heart of the ungrazed ground south of Old Samoa Road was to be converted. There's a great deal to this tale, but I feel the readership needs to know at least what follows. Perhaps you too will shake your head.

Few with an understanding of the dynamics of seral grassland communities would argue against the concept that these lands benefit from burning, with a consequent regeneration of young growth. The area in question has not been grazed since 1988. Although it has experienced little disturbance since that time, the natural succession cycle manifested by encroachment of brush and hardwood saplings has not materially altered its appearance nor function as a grassland. The combination of low matted vegetal remains, abundant grass and forbs, scattered low blackberry, occasional saplings, and damp spots has created a rich habitat which is simply overrun with microtine rodents.

It would hardly be necessary to document or quantify this by sampling transect lines of Sherman traps or deadfalls---it is dramatically manifested by the great number and variety of raptors which use the area daily, particularly during the colder months. Those of us who enjoy the area for its 'raptor richness' need not read detailed list of these birds; all that is necessary is to go see them.

And how did the Department describe the state of this grassland, this raptor smorgasbord? It was termed 'decadent thatch'! The employee with whom I met assured me that this land had 'lost its productivity', and that few rodents remained! For this reason, I was told, the area would be burned and planted to 'short grass'. Only later did I understand that 'short grass' was in fact a guarded euphemism for cattle pasture, and that the real reason for the entire project was to mitigate for perceived or actual competition from nonnative geese the Department itself had introduced!

The final point to be addressed here is that the Department has decided to create new pasturage to attempt to attract the offending geese away from the parcels of concern. One can ask, Why would they move? How does the Department know that geese attracted to the new area will be those which are offending ranchers? Why won't the

habitat simply fill with geese, with a 'rebound' into the parcels in concern taking place as soon as next year's scores of goslings begin to mature and fill all available habitat? In response to these questions, which I posed, I was told that the Department 'didn't know if it would work...this isn't rocket science'.

It appears that we must not only 'watchdog' the timber industry and the run-of-the-mill developers---now we have to stay on top of our own state Department of Fish and Game's plans to manage publicly-held Wildlife Areas. Areas, plural? Yes. Demand to see the plan in the offing to dike a large tidal shorebird flat at Eel River Wildlife Area---in order to produce puddle ducks.

Where's The Atlas Project Right Now? (October 2000)

By David Fix

This past spring and summer, members of the Breeding Bird Atlas Steering Committee continued to work toward completion of the project. Field surveys of the 380 blocks were completed in 1999, so our steady progress toward the goal of a published book required more computer screen than sunscreen in 2000. Increasingly in recent weeks, John Hunter, Greg Schmidt, Jude Power and I have begun to catch glimpses of a Teasing And Nebulous Non-Darkness somewhere further along in the karmic tunnel in which we continue to labor. The glow of this Nebulous Non-Darkness illuminates our faces, now more often grinning in excitement than lined with concern. Having surveyed birds on countless weekends over the past five years, it is a relief for each of us to enjoy more time at home. Nearly all of the work remaining will take place in the home office.

With the corps of volunteers no longer combing the countryside and yet with no finished product at hand, the public profile of the Breeding Bird Atlas project has changed. Over the next year or so, you won't be hearing quite so much about it. So just what is currently happening with the Atlas? It is entirely alive and well, with a core group of several long-time participants directing it toward completion. The project has entered a new phase---several at once, actually. Here's a quick update.

Tom Leskiw, for several years an energetic Steering Committee member, has resigned. We thank him for his valuable contributions, and for his diligent work toward coming up with creative and successful solutions to many atlasing problems. We wish the best for Tom and his new bride, the former Sue O'Connell, as they enjoy more time together feathering their new nest.

Five years of field surveys from across the sprawling Nation Of Humboldt has resulted in a database built of thousands upon thousands of reports. As we request additional information from outside sources such as large private landowners, the database keeps growing. Lately, Jude and I enjoyed a spirited morning meeting with a half-dozen private timber company biologists, filling in blank spots in the maps and accumulating some surprising reports.

Greg has continued to govern and marshal this mountain of information capably. His expertise with computers and graphics has proven essential to the atlas project. He generated for the committee our first set of draft maps this past summer. Each map shows every block in the county in which a species was detected, using the 'best' report from that block based on anywhere from one to dozens of records.

We found the draft maps to be at once affirming, puzzling, and entirely fascinating. Many are 'affirming' inasmuch as they show a species to have occurred during the 1995-1999 Atlas survey just about right where our 'conventional wisdom' might place them within the county. Some are 'puzzling' because they suggest a distribution or core area of greatest density that perhaps does not jibe well with the typical local birder's preconceived notions of distribution. Irrespective of whether a species may have been detected in 25 blocks or 250, each map is fascinating---offering a tantalizing sampling of the actual Truth existing out there, a 'truth' that in its fullest complexity can never be surveyed and cannot be made known.

Having already dog-eared our own stack of draft maps in checking them against the data set, I can assure you that the maps you will pore over again and again in the finished Humboldt County Breeding Bird Atlas stand for far more than cold data collection. For those who have contributed their precious time to the project, each odd and unique pattern of black, gray, and stippled squares will bring back memories you figured you'd forgotten. Among the sprinklings of black-and-white squares, you will remember YOUR Red-breasted Sapsucker nest, your frantic

Killdeer family, and your hummingbird nest---a backyard gem now possibly standing as 'Best In Block'! As a collection, the maps are testimony to just how much concerted birding was carried out over the five-year survey: the weekend chores put off; the afternoon at the swimming hole deferred; gardens left untended, flat tires changed, locked gates encountered, permission for access hard-won, and the delayed gratification of a promised final product now much nearer to being realized.

It would seem likely that each Breeding Bird Atlas project must approach the matter of art acquisition in a somewhat different manner. Early on, the Humboldt BBA Steering Committee decided to offer sponsorship of original art. The idea was greeted favorably indeed. It has blossomed into what will ultimately become a unique and durable exposition of original Humboldt bird art. A growing coterie of illustrators has begun to produce endearing portraits of local nesting birds. Jude has overseen this portion of the Atlas project from its outset.

John has continued to act as group 'nudger-and-prodder', helping us concentrate on tasks at hand as well as envisioning those steps as yet somewhere down the road. By undertaking the writing of several species accounts in roughly their final format, he has advised us on what kind of time and effort that will ultimately entail. John's consistent leadership and ability to see 'down the road' has been a great asset to the project.

Along with John, I have reviewed the master set of 'best records', making note of especially significant or representative occurrences, red-penning reports for which we need more information, and marking all of the draft maps with remarks possibly valuable in crafting the species accounts. These marginal notations include thoughts such as, "Concentration of confirmations in preferred habitat here"; "disjunct population in grasslands in east county"; "obviously absent west of fog belt"; "distribution closely matches major river corridors", and of course the inevitable note of exasperation such as "big hole here...why?"

A few months ago I summarized for each species a set of capsule statements based on what I believe I understand of their habitat preferences, behaviors, and migrational and nesting timing. I hope these notes will be used, questioned, and revised by the group as we continue to create the individual accounts. We are shooting for a self-imposed April 2001 deadline for a draft intended to be circulated for review.

And that's where the Humboldt County Breeding Bird Atlas is today!