

# The Sandpiper

October 2020



## Redwood Region Audubon Society

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

*In This Issue:* • Rare Bird at Mad River • Mass Bird Mortality in the West • Series Finalé • “Drawing Birds” on Zoom

### Catios: The Cat – and Bird – Solution

By Harriet Hill

Join the trend and create a catio! In case you missed it, catios (cat patios), are now “a thing” and many cat-lovers and contractors are becoming familiar with how to create them. A catio is an enclosed outdoor space, built to keep your indoor cat happy and healthy. These pet playhouses provide fresh air, mental stimulation, and a place where cats can interact with each other, watch birds and other wildlife, or just lounge in the sun in a natural, outside space. Catios can be as elaborate as a custom jungle gym or as simple as a screened-in portion of your patio, deck, or yard. They are a great way to provide safe outdoor enrichment for your cat and protect wildlife at the same time.



10' x 11' Arcata catio with tree limbs for climbing and space for humans! Note: wire mesh is safer.

A wandering cat can irritate your neighbors, since kitties readily use any garden bed or lawn as a litter box. They also enjoy hanging around the neighborhood bird feeders for a quick bite! Indeed, a great concern for those of us who love birds is that cats at large take a tremendous toll on birds and other wildlife. The American Bird Conservancy estimates that in the United States alone, outdoor cats kill around 2.4 billion birds every year. A recent study found that free-roaming house cats have a two-to-ten-times larger impact on wildlife than wild predators.

Outdoor cats can cost you more money because the increased likelihood of illnesses or injuries can result in large veterinary bills. Going outside unattended is also dangerous for cats. Outdoor cats simply don't live as long as indoor cats due to:

- Other territorial cats, dogs, and wild animals
- Infectious diseases and parasites
- Getting lost or picked up by a stranger
- Getting hit by a car

**In-Person, Guided Field Trips Restart in October! Stay tuned to our website at [rras.org](http://rras.org)**

So, what can you do if your cat loves going outside? There are many ways to keep her/him happy inside but probably the best answer is to install a catio. (Simpler steps to improve your cat's indoor environment will be discussed in a future article).

What are the advantages of a catio?

- It adds more cat-friendly territory to your house.
- It can help reduce conflicts with your other pets and neighbors.
- It can allow you to enjoy playing or relaxing with your kitty outside in their natural environment.

It provides the best of both worlds for a cat: s/he can be completely safe while exercising and enjoying the smells and sounds of the outdoors. You can buy a catio or build it yourself. (There are dozens of options so look at a variety of designs online.) Catios can be fitted into almost any space that you might have to work with. Consider the following factors before you start your project:

**Size:** Plan for the number of cats that will use it. Allow space for potential items such as scratching posts, food and water, cat beds, or a litter box. Of course, smaller catios and those with easy access may not need all these things. If you want to hang with your best buddy, make sure there is space for you!

**Building material and design:** Make it safe and sturdy. Use as many natural materials as possible (such as tree limbs for climbing and scratching on). Avoid sharp edges that can injure, or fabric mesh that can be shredded and allow escape. If you are building a floor into the catio, be sure it can hold your weight for easy cleaning. Create more than one level because felines love to climb up high to survey their world. Perches/shelves, ramps, steps, bridges, hammocks, and catwalks are some possibilities. Make sure there is some shade! You can also place a heating pad in a protected area for winter use. Use wire mesh that is

thick enough to avoid damage from weather or predators, and small enough to prevent birds from getting inside. Remember, cats like to see the sky as well as out the sides.

**Plants:** Plant oat grass, wheat grass, and catnip in containers for an edible garden or any ornamentals. Cats also appreciate a bit of grassy lawn to chew and roll on.

**Weather:** Build it to handle all weather conditions, including drainage for rain runoff.

**Easy access:** A catio is more appealing if your cat can go in and out as s/he pleases. Install a cat door or a window opening or create a walkway or tunnel from your house to the playhouse.

We will eventually invite you to come out and view an array of catios in Humboldt County when RRAS holds its local catio tour (in the dry season of 2021, if the pandemic allows). In the meantime, we are working on posting a virtual tour on our website of several Arcata/McKinleyville catios. Please watch this space and our website at [rras.org](http://rras.org).



Above: Mathew Huff's street-side Eureka catio, complete with kitty hammock. Photo by Alexa DeJoannis. Left: 5' x 6' catio. Photo courtesy of Catio Spaces.



### Ocean Ranch Restoration Project Draft Environmental Impact Report

**Now Available for Public Comment!**

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) has completed its Draft EIR for the Ocean Ranch Restoration Project (see article in September's issue of *The Sandpiper* at [rras.org](http://rras.org)), pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The public review period began September 17 and will end November 2 at 11:59 pm. A copy of the Draft EIR is available at [www.wildlife.ca.gov/Notices](http://www.wildlife.ca.gov/Notices). Comments on the project and Draft EIR may be submitted to CDFW in writing, by email, or orally at a virtual Draft EIR public hearing scheduled for October 13, 2020 from 6 to 7:30 pm. To participate in the public hearing and/or provide comments on the Draft EIR, please visit this website for instructions:

[wildlife.ca.gov/Regions/1/Ocean-Ranch-Restoration-Project](http://wildlife.ca.gov/Regions/1/Ocean-Ranch-Restoration-Project)

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## President's Column

By Gail Kenny

A common aspect of birding is that there will be misidentifications. There are two corrections for last month's *Sandpiper*. In the President's Column, the rare bird reported from January 1992 was a King Eider, not a Common Eider. In the "Mother Nature Bats Last" article regarding Ocean Ranch, the photo caption of the bird identified as a Lesser Sandpiper should have read Lesser Sandplover, as it was correctly referred to in the article.

This highlights a typical birder experience that you will at some point have to deal with. You could be called out on it, especially if you report it publicly. It will be embarrassing. There may be hard feelings. Don't be discouraged. Don't quit birding. We all have misidentified

birds or recorded them incorrectly. It's time to normalize this part of birding. Know that there are many varieties of birders in our community and please know that you are welcome in any shape or form that you engage in birding. Bird identification is best done as a discussion or collaboration. Getting confirmation of a rare bird is a common practice because bird identification can be very tricky and complex.

Use the experience for learning. The irony for me is that in the first draft of my last column, I originally identified the bird as a King Eider but when I checked my life list kept in an old field guide, I saw that I had marked it as a Common Eider, so I switched it in my column. My lesson learned is to double-check the official records. When I record my lifers, I will double-check that I'm ticking the right birds. Remember, birding is about having fun, as well as getting it right!

## From Field to Folio: Drawing Birds from Inspiration to Completion – Friday, October 9, at 7 pm



Have you been wondering how to start or improve on sketching birds? Join in RRAS's live Zoom program with Gary Bloomfield, local artist and illustrator, to explore how to get a grip on bird anatomy and apply this knowledge to sketching birds in the field or from your own photo and video references.

Gary will present examples of his field sketches and finished paintings, show how to use your smartphone to digiscope your own photos for useful references, and give a crash course in bird anatomy. Have a sketchbook and a drawing tool handy!

All photos and artwork by Gary Bloomfield.  
 Contact Gary at [bloomfieldstudio@me.com](mailto:bloomfieldstudio@me.com)



Above left: Tools of the trade from Gary's desk. Above right top: Green Heron. Above right: Bell's Sparrow. See more of Gary's artwork at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/bloomfieldstudio/sets/72157642703538265/>.

## Exploring the Feasibility of Offshore Wind Energy for the California North Coast

Schatz Energy Research Center (SERC) and the Offshore Wind Studies Team is offering a series of webinars on the feasibility of offshore wind energy on the North Coast. Offshore wind energy projects can impact pelagic and migrating birds, as well as marine life. This five-part webinar series is being held at 2 pm on Mondays. The last two in the series are on October 5: *Community Perspectives on Regional Impacts and Opportunities*, and on October 12: *Reflections and Next Steps*. All webinar recordings will be published on the [schatzcenter.org/wind](http://schatzcenter.org/wind) website; please register there. Each webinar shares findings from recently completed studies conducted by SERC and its partners. Topics include energy generation and transmission, local economic and job development, port and coastal infrastructure, and ecological and geological environmental considerations. After each presentation, there is a moderated panel discussion, followed by a community conversation. Photo courtesy of TNO Wind Energy.



## Raptors Are the Solution (RATS) and AB 1788: We have some rapturous news!

By Lisa Owens Viani, RATS co-founder and director



Thanks to community members' phone calls, emails, and letters, AB 1788 passed through the state legislature! AB 1788 will prevent more bird and other wildlife poisonings by placing a moratorium on second-generation anticoagulant rodenticides until the California Department of Pesticide Regulation finishes its reevaluation process, a process put in motion by a lawsuit filed by RATS in 2018 under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). RATS is thrilled with this win for children, pets, and wildlife and is very grateful to Assemblymember Richard Bloom for his years of persistence in tackling this issue. Please stay tuned for next steps as this bill makes its way to the Governor's desk.

Left: Cartoon drawing by Joe Dator.

Contact Lisa anytime with questions or concerns at [raptorsarethesolution@gmail.com](mailto:raptorsarethesolution@gmail.com)

## Breaking News! A very rare bird was spotted September 18 near the Mad River!

**A Northern Wheatear** By Keith Slauson

Early morning on September 18, I headed down to the McKinleyville bottoms for a bit of birding before work. As I came down the hill toward Hammond Bridge, I spotted a vibrant bird perched on top of a fencepost whose color, size, and shape suggested it was something interesting.

Raising my binoculars, I was stunned to see a bird with facial pattern and coloring matching a Northern Wheatear. I quickly pulled over and took a few photos to document the bird, just in case it took off quickly, and then grabbed my phone to alert the rest of the birding community. Luckily, the bird remained long enough, foraging from the same fence line, for many birders to observe and photograph.

Using a variety of references, Rob Fowler and I concluded the bird is an after-hatch-year male, based on



several plumage characteristics. If accepted by the California Bird Records Committee, it will be the 2nd record for Humboldt County; the first was from Shelter Cove in 1977.

Northern Wheatears breed in the Western Hemisphere, arriving in North America from their wintering grounds in the Middle East and Northern Africa by migrating across Europe to Canada and across Asia to Alaska, crossing the respective Atlantic or Pacific oceans. They nest in rocky outcrops in open tundra habitats in Alaska (*O. o. oeanthe*) and in Greenland and eastern Canada as far south as Labrador (*O. o. leucorhoa*).

Fortunately for the many of us who got to see this bird, it did not fly back across the Pacific to Asia but headed down the Pacific coast to Humboldt county!

Left: Northern Wheatear on September 18, at Fischer Avenue, just north of Hammond Bridge, Mckinleyville.  
Photo by Ralph Bucher.

## Bird-by-Ear Blues

By Sarah Hobart

I've always believed that the ability to identify a bird by sound alone is more than an art, or even a science. It's downright supernatural. How do those birders-by-ear do it? A trill, a chirp, a buzz, a tweet – and *bam*, they warble out the name of the species. Then, a minute later, that exact bird saunters out of the brush. Magic.

I've always wanted to be one of those birders. And believe me, I've used all the recordings and technology available. But nothing has really worked. I even tried playing a birding-by-ear CD every night, figuring I'd absorb the songs subliminally while I slept. But when I started waking up just before dawn with an overwhelming urge to eat my Cheerios off the floor, I gave up on that idea.

Then, a friend sent me a clock that played a different bird call at the top of each hour. And after just a few weeks of daily reinforcement, I had those twelve calls locked in. Sadly, this approach worked a little too well. I was at the Arcata Marsh with a few other birders when we heard the familiar rattle of a Belted Kingfisher.

"Five o'clock!" I shouted. The clock was relegated to the garage.

Now I'm trying the very latest innovation: a phone app that actually records bird sounds and spits out the species name. But after the fifth time it told me I was hearing a Yellow-billed Cuckoo, I got the sense it might be referring to me...

I guess my brain's just not wired for sound – it's literally in one ear, out the other. So it looks like my only option is to spend more time in the field re-learning those calls bird-by-bird, every season.

More birding? Not gonna squawk about that!



## A Series by Amaya Bechler

At the time of writing, it's been just about a month since I was supposed to leave my hometown for Cornell University. The last two years of my high school education have led up to this moment; stepping out into the real world for the first time, fledging from the nest – it has been a long-awaited moment. Instead, like many other students, I've been glumly glued to a computer screen, taking my university classes on Zoom, from home.

The reality of the worldwide pandemic has led to a lot of plans being canceled. Among those were the plans for this article; this was supposed to be a reflection on my first few weeks at my dream school. But online Gen-Ed. not being the most riveting topic, and having found I may have fledged in a different way, I am instead going to reflect on one of my most valuable experiences here in Humboldt: learning to band birds.

When I first entered the banding lab of Humboldt Bay Bird Observatory (HBBO), I was a shy high school sophomore and I was terribly intimidated by my first experience of bird banding. HSU students? People I didn't know? Collecting accurate data? A disciplined work environment? Real scary stuff. In fact, I was so terrified that it took me six months to warm up to the idea of learning to band birds. But in the two years since, I've spent a lot of time learning to do just that. It has become one of my most-rewarding endeavors and the highlight of every week. Bird banding, most simply, is the process of marking wild birds with a numbered aluminum band. This allows researchers to assess the physical health of the birds and, in some cases, track birds, whether it be by geo-locator or recapture of an already-banded bird.

There's something truly awe-inspiring about handling a wild, living creature. Up close, birds are possibly even more beautiful than they are in the field: beady-eyed, lively, and simultaneously delicate and hearty, there's really nothing quite like it.

There is one morning, early in my training, I will never forget. I had caught an American Goldfinch. Holding his feet very carefully between the fore- and middle fingers of my left hand, I took his measurements. I could only try to imagine how it would feel if things were reversed and I was in his shoes; suddenly whisked up in the

## My Birding Beginnings

hands of a giant unknown creature, my life literally in those hands. As I gently determined his age and sex, his tiny toes wrapped around my finger and he looked up at me with these bright, ebony eyes. I felt the connection – and the responsibility. It was breathtaking.

As with any research that involves the handling of wildlife, bird banding comes with risks. And for good reason, federal permitting is required for handling wild birds. Wild species must be protected. It therefore requires the utmost diligence; the priority always being the safety of the bird. That means thorough training, efficiency, and discipline are all essential to a handler. For me, discipline is the area where I've seen the most personal growth. And it is a continuous process of improvement.

When banding my first few birds, I remember my hands shaking. Birds are squirmy. Band application requires specific, fine motor skills. A lot of the measurements are difficult to see without experience. Everyone is nervous when they band their first bird. The nervousness never really goes away; it only becomes controlled. That's a good thing. It's important to always be alert and attentive, to always be disciplined.

Thankfully, along the way, there have been experienced banders – including those HSU students who initially intimidated me – to help and encourage me. I owe a lot of my knowledge to the various volunteers at HBBO. And being placed in a work environment has taught me the skill of "adulting" – working as a team, being polite, and other general life skills such as organization.

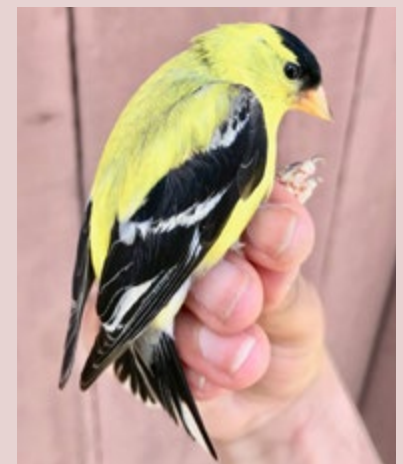
COVID-19 has changed a lot about how the banding station operates, but I am so grateful that I get to continue to do it and with increased responsibilities. Even if I'm not leaving Humboldt County this year, with all that I have learned and experienced, I still fledged. And I still have something I truly look forward to every week: waking up early, driving through the darkness to the fog-shrouded Lanphere Dunes, unfurling the mist nets, and waiting to see what fall migrants will be bestowed upon us this day.

All parts of Amaya's series are available at [www.ras.org](http://www.ras.org) under previous "Newsletters."

## Part III: The Fledgling (Finalé)



Photos by Amaya Bechler.  
Above: House Finch.  
Below: American Goldfinch.



## Fledglings and Follies

By Nora Chatmon, Humboldt Wildlife Care Center (HWCC) staff, and Bird Ally X Board member

I smile at the harried young man as he timidly approaches the counter. With wide, concerned eyes, he delicately hands over a ragged cardboard box. A small bird, he says, found injured on the ground and not flying. As the on-site staff member of a wildlife rehabilitation center, I whisk the box into the exam room and carefully open it. Inside is a bright little fledgling finch, eyeing me with bewilderment. An exam reveals there are no wounds or injuries to be found.

On another occasion, I carefully explain over the phone to a concerned member of the public that the “injured” and squawking crow she is seeing hopping around on the ground in potential trouble is merely a juvenile, and the unusual behavior she is observing is entirely normal. It is not uncommon for me to respond to calls about injured birds on the ground and unable to fly. On arrival, I often discover a healthy young fledgling with parents nearby. I recently ventured out on a call concerning an injured sparrow found on the ground. Upon my approach, the young and energetic fledgling fervently hopped away into a cluster of low-growing leaves. I sighed in relief that I wouldn’t be admitting a new patient that day.

With scenarios such as these becoming more and more commonplace in the spring and summer months, I realize there is a need for more information about these developing avians than what is commonly known or provided to the observant public. Young birds do not, in fact, take off flying directly from the nest in which they hatch. However, the fledgling – an intermediate developmental stage between the newly hatched nestling and the fully flighted adult – largely seems to be a mystery among the attentive people we rely on to rescue our local wildlife.

There comes a time in young birds’ lives when they become completely feathered, resemble the adult parent, but have not yet learned to fly and are still reliant on parental care. Quite similar to a human toddler, they are highly mobile and will normally venture away from their nests as they grow. Attempts to return them to their nest are often futile, as they naturally begin to explore the world around them. They often can be seen awkwardly hopping about, flapping their wings, and vocalizing on the ground. Being that this behavior is entirely normal, a fledgling’s parents will feed

and care for their offspring wherever they happen to be. These parents often can be seen in the nearby area but can be hard to spot since they are wary of human presence.

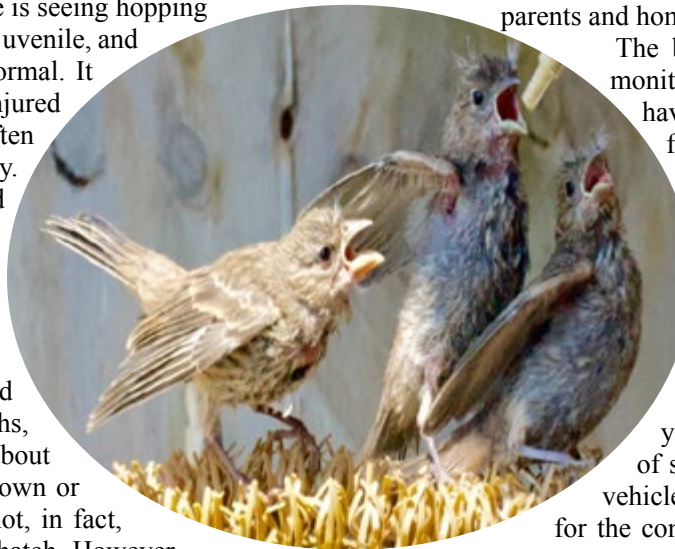
If an adult bird is on the ground due to an acute injury or trauma, s/he can typically be seen to be drooping or dragging one or both wings, lying or sitting on the ground, unable to walk or to get away from a human or other potential predator, showing weakness and lethargy, lying on her/his back, not vocalizing, and/or bleeding from wounds. If any of these observations can be made, then the bird should be brought to a rehabilitation center right away. However, if a bird that, at first glance, appears to be an adult and the only apparent ailment is a lack of flight, then depending on the time of year, this could be a fledgling. In this case, a rehabilitation center should be contacted before any action is taken, so as not to remove the fledgling from her/his parents and home.

The best course of action for these little ones is to simply monitor them where they are. As long as they seem energetic and have others of their species in the vicinity, it is most helpful for a person to keep a distant eye on them and keep away potential predators such as domestic cats and dogs. It is optimal that they are raised by their own families in order to have their best shot at survival. No human institution can teach fledgling birds better than their own parents.

If you believe any animal is in trouble, contain them carefully and immediately bring them to your nearest wildlife rehabilitation clinic. Please do not attempt to provide water, feed, or keep them. Cover the container you are using with a lightweight cloth so that the stress of seeing their rescuer and the landscape whizzing by in the vehicle is reduced. And provide a quiet environment. If it wasn’t for the compassionate people who keep a constant eye out for our wild neighbors in trouble, we wouldn’t be able to determine the status of those whose survival may depend upon us. Any and all public assistance is greatly appreciated!

*If you find a wild animal and are concerned for her/his health, please call HWCC at (707) 822-8839. They are located at 2182 Old Arcata Road, Bayside, CA 95524. You can also contact them if you would like educational advice or materials. Please consider making a tax-deductible donation to this wonderful service in our community.*

**Photo by Laura Corsiglia:** Orphaned House Finch fledglings, raised in HWCC’s songbird aviary, in last stages of care.



## Massive Mortality of Birds in the West

Compiled by CJ Ralph, Gisèle Albertine, and Gail Kenny

Over the past few weeks, various species of migratory birds in New Mexico and other Western states are dying in unprecedented numbers of unknown causes. Thousands of migrating birds, including flycatchers, swallows, and warblers – have been found dead across New Mexico, Colorado, Texas, Arizona, and farther north into Nebraska. Various reports have suggested that these deaths are the result of wildfires sweeping the region. This is a logical place to start, as birds’ lungs are extremely susceptible to damage from pollutants, as with the proverbial canary in the coal mine.

Allison Nelson, executive director at Gold Country Avian Studies near Grass Valley, relates that “For the past three weeks, we have been constantly engulfed in smoke... We are all coughing and our eyes are constantly itchy.... This has to be really hard on birds from a health perspective, not to mention the fact that fledglings may have had to escape their natal grounds before completely independent from parents. They may not have had time to fatten up and stopover sites are on fire or simply gone.”

Another theory, according to *The Guardian’s*, Phoebe Weston and Patrick Greenfield, is, “The climate crisis is... changing the tundra landscape where many

of these birds’ breed, while the destruction of rainforests in Central and South America is damaging their winter habitats. Since 1970, three billion birds have been lost in the US and Canada. Mass die-offs such as this can have an effect on populations of both common and sensitive species.

Allison Salas, a graduate student at New Mexico State University (NMSU), notes: “We’re kind of coming at them from all sides... If we don’t do anything to protect their habitat, we’re going to lose large numbers of the populations of several species.”

However, as reported by Jenna McCullough and the American Birding Association, “The Rocky Mountain states experienced a strong storm that brought with it snow, near-hurricane-force winds, and unseasonable, record-breaking cold temperatures. In Albuquerque on September 8, it was sunny and a record-high 96°F. The next afternoon, a severe windstorm tore through the region. The Albuquerque airport measured windspeed of over 70 mph and temperatures plummeted to historic lows. New Mexico received several inches of heavy, wet snow as far south as the Sandia Mountains east of Albuquerque.”

Although much attention is being given to the Western wildfires, McCullough believes there is another reason: lack of food. “Of the hundreds of birds we assessed, none had fat stores on their bodies.

Furthermore, many birds also showed signs of breast muscle atrophy, which points to starvation and dehydration. The 55–60°F temperature swing observed in New Mexico, combined with hurricane-force winds and wet snow, very likely caused hypothermia in some birds, especially juveniles. Furthermore, cold temperatures also affect the food supply for insectivores, as insects (which become dormant or dead) are then covered by snow. While cold temperatures and snow cut off the food supply for naïve migrants, resident birds not stressed by migration typically have both fat reserves and local knowledge of where to find shelter.”

As is the case with many such confounding explanations, the actual cause probably can be laid at more than one door.



A sample of the dead migratory birds. Photo courtesy of Martha Desmond, NMSU.