The Sandpiper

September 2020

Redwood Region Audubon Society

www.rras.org

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The Story of Science

By Marlon D Sherman, HSU Professor

Early mornings at my computer, sipping coffee, window open, listening to others who are awake: the little hummingbird proclaiming the mallow by the back fence as his territory, he bushtits, juncos, and sparrows talking quietly in the ferns and red maple. Young crows fluttering and squawking for Mom to feed them. The old raven chuttering somewhere in the trees. They each tell their own stories that we might learn, if we would just listen. And we should listen, because storytelling is history. Storytelling is culture. Storytelling is science.

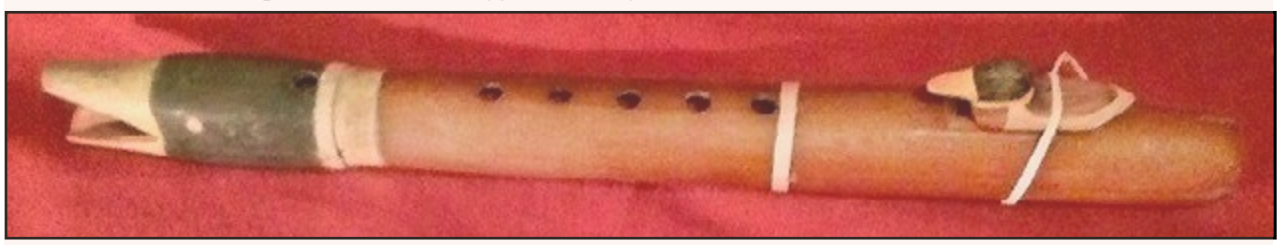
I don't remember Grandpa Ben's face anymore. We have no pictures of him. But I remember his voice. His words surrounded us securely as if we were babies in cradleboards. They were sacred words, breath of life. I don't remember Grandpa Ben's face, but I remember the story times in his and Grandma Amy's little log house. The wood stove hummed and crackled behind Grandpa Ben; his chair squeaked in time with each gesture. His eyes shone like obsidian in the lamplight; his skin glowed brown, gold, rich. We sat on a buffalo skin and I buried my fingers in its deep, soft fur. It smelled old, but not musty or dry. It smelled like a hundred times a hundred wood fires, soaked in the warm rustling of cottonwood logs, tangy with pinesap smoke.

Grandpa Ben's stories were a total experience. They engaged all of our senses, wrapped us up in a complete package of sight, sound, smell, feel, history, and morality. But most important, they wrapped us in love. These are stories we remember because they came from a person who loved and respected us, and whom we loved and respected in turn. We will remember this experience for a long time. What better way to learn? It was much better than sitting in a large, bare room at a small desk, listening to a teacher none of us knew and few respected, telling us bare facts to which we must listen on pain of punishment. There is no love or comfort or family feeling in that. Education backed by fear is only temporary.

Orally transmitted cultures often are looked upon as something less than more-industrialized, more-academic cultures because they keep no written records, or very few. Critics assume facts will be lost or changed due to faulty memory – everything must be written in some fashion, then read back to a new generation of students. In this way, they feel, no detail will be missed or forgotten. This assumption proves critics have had no real experience with the collective memory of an oral culture.

Stories may change over time or place. But what does not change significantly is the Peoples' need for or search for scientific knowledge. Facts concerning medicine and food gathering, for instance, always have been assiduously passed down through the generations. People knew that if they told the story wrong or forgot the words, it might endanger the well-being of the tribe. Many Native groups have retained a large portion of this knowledge, though many in the majority culture are unaware of it, and the small academic groups that may be aware of native science often look down on Indigenous cures and technology, calling them ineffective because they derive from "myth" and "superstition." But Native science derives from as much intensive study as Euromerican science; the difference, as Vine Deloria, Greg Cajete, and others have pointed out, lies in the fact that very little indigenous knowledge results from invasive techniques. Too often, Euromerican scientific practices have caused physical, mental, spiritual, and political hardship for Indigenous Peoples.

Using invasive scientific tools may be useful in the short term for exploration or commercial gain, but in the end, foreign methods are useless to Native cultures, because they ignore the proven ability of Indigenous Peoples to exist successfully in this world. We place primary importance on our relationships with our communities, with the Earth, and with all of the Peoples (two and four-legged and winged), who live on the Earth.



Above: Carved Lakota flute, handed down from my grandfather, Ben Worn Out Horn, Lakota, from the Cheyenne River Reservation in South Dakota. It passed to his daughter and on to her nephew, my eldest brother, Ben W Sherman, who took the photo. It is two pieces of what we think are pine, so our grandfather may have used some scrap lumber he had lying around. There is a duck over the sound hole that I carved because the original noisemaker piece went missing. Many flute makers use bears, buffalo, or eagles to cover the sound hole. Lakota flutes are mostly either Sandhill Cranes or they are just plain. Other forms are rare.

Virtual Program: September 11

At 7pm Heather Kenny will present her Master's degree research in a Zoom program entitled:

"Female Bluebirds with High Aggression Are Better at Coping with Noise Pollution."

Heather Kenny is a Humboldt County native who grew up in Trinidad and earned a BS in Wildlife Biology from UC-Davis in 2014. She earned a Master's degree in Biology from the College of William & Mary in August 2020, where she studied Eastern Bluebird behavior. Her interest in birds developed when she started volunteering at the Klamath Bird Observatory and working as an avian ecology intern at the Archbold Biological Station in Florida. She is particularly interested in the behavioral variation between individual birds. Her research has focused mainly on understanding how variation in behaviors like aggression and boldness influence individual fitness and population success under different environmental conditions. Heather is currently pursuing a PhD at the University of Colorado in Boulder.

In her research, she found that female aggression levels influenced whether bluebirds settled in noisy or quiet breeding sites and partly determined the effect of traffic noise on parental care of nestlings. It is important for biologists and wildlife managers to understand the variety of ways that individual birds respond to human-caused stressors like noise pollution because it provides insight into how populations might evolve in response to them. It also allows folks to tailor more effective management and conservation strategies.

Above Top: Experimental speaker assemblies used to play traffic sounds. **Above:** Setting up a pair of mist nets around a bluebird nest box. The male was lured into the nets using a foam decoy painted like another male bluebird and a recording played of the bluebird song.

Please note: *All our Zoom presentations are available on our website. Please also stay tuned via* www.rras.org *as we carefully consider the future of our in-person free guided birding tours and trips.*

Thinking of Joining the National Audubon Society?

If so, please use the coupon below. By sending in your membership on this form, rather than replying to solicitations from National Audubon, **$20 is sent directly to our chapter**. This is how National rewards local chapters for recruiting. (Otherwise, the share of membership dues that RRAS receives is only a couple of dollars.) Thanks!

Yes, I'd like to join. Please enroll me as a member of the National Audubon Society and of my local chapter **(RRAS C24)**, and send AUDUBON magazine and my membership card to the address below. My check for $20 is enclosed (introductory offer).
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President's Column

By Gail Kenny

I was on the RRAS board in 1992 when I was pregnant with my daughter, Heather, who is presenting this month's virtual program on Bluebirds. Back then, for rare bird alerts there was no Listserve, Birdbox, or eBird. All we had was a phone tree. In January, Brooks Allen called my house to report a King Eider at Field's Landing. My husband answered and told him I had just given birth to Heather. As he called the rest of the phone tree, he also announced Heather's arrival. Several birders showed up at the hospital to welcome Heather. A month later, since the King Eider was still present; I went out looking and found it for a "lifer!"

Left: Gail & Heather in January 1992.
Right: King Eiders by John James Audubon.

Prey-go-neesh

By Monte Merrick
Co-director of Humboldt Wildlife Care Center/Bird Ally X

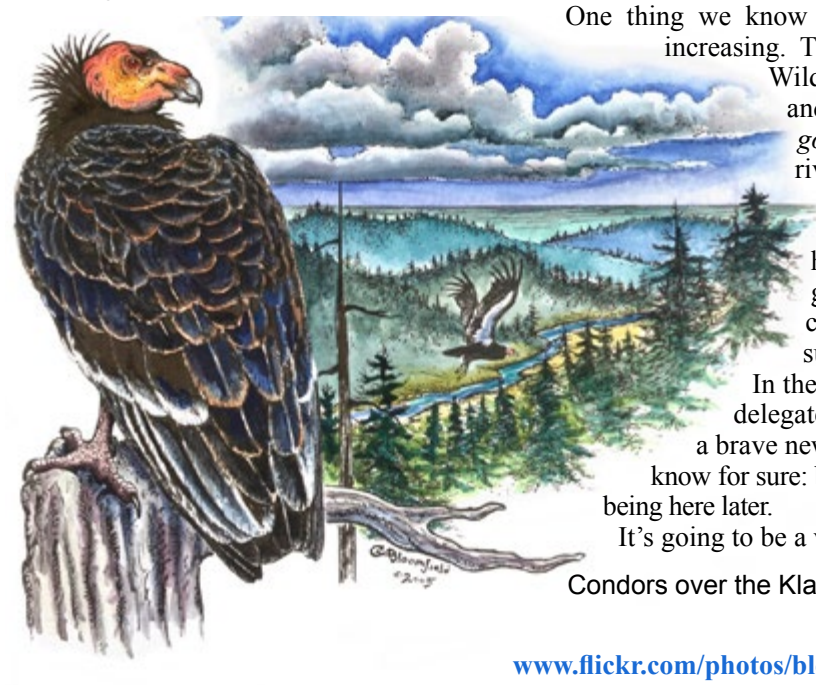
Since 1987, when the last of the free-flying California Condors (*Gymnogyps californianus*) were trapped and brought into captivity in a dramatic attempt to save the population from extinction, people all over the world have watched closely as the number of these incredibly large vultures slowly increased. Starting in 1987, with 27 birds held in captive breeding programs at zoos in Los Angeles and San Diego, a milestone was passed last September: the fledging of the thousandth condor hatched since then, in Zion National Park, Utah.

As many birders know, the California Condor, known as *prey-go-neesh* in the Yurok language, is the largest North American land bird that once had a range extending from coast to coast. By the time of European colonization of North America, the condor's range was limited to the West Coast, and then further decimated as a result of that colonization. By the modern era, condors only existed in the southern part of California.

Now, in Humboldt County, due especially to the efforts of the Yurok Tribe, California Condors soon are to be a part of the Redwood Coast again, after a long time gone. I want to see condors in the sky here at home. I want to watch them flap-lessly bank on the onshore breeze, turn a wingtip, and soar. As a wildlife rehabilitator, I deeply appreciate restorative justice. Why else care for, say a raccoon, orphaned when her mother is hit by a car and doesn't return to the den? She and her siblings aren't just the victims of personal tragedy. They've been wronged – their natural contract violated by the machinery of a denaturalized human society. Their suffering is an injustice and care is an attempt to right those wrongs.

It's a complicated thing – raising an orphaned wild animal, replacing a missing parent, building an artifice to provide something akin to the wild education a young animal would receive from her/his parents or their own nature, and the things that are definitive of their species. Over the last 20 years I've had the privilege of being close to thousands of juvenile Brown Pelicans as a care provider when they've been caught in the mayhem of human society. Most young Brown Pelicans in care, at the most superficial level, need one thing: fish. For a starving juvenile, food fixes the immediate problem. But soon, when caring for these birds, you realize a bigger issue.

By the early 1970s, when DDT and other pressures had reduced the California Brown Pelican population from the millions of birds present in 1850 to about 5000 breeding pairs, a body of knowledge, passed on from generation to generation for millennia, was irreparably interrupted. Brown Pelicans, like the condor, are long-lived birds, living at least 40 years. Think about how many 40-year-old pelicans there are today – birds who hatched around 1980, when numbers were at their lowest. Today's pelican population is skewed heavily toward younger birds. It means that there is recovery from a path to extinction, but it doesn't necessarily save their culture or their passed-down knowledge of the world and how to thrive in it.



One thing we know for sure: young California Condors are increasing. Thanks to the Yurok Tribe, US Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, and many volunteers, we may soon see *prey-go-neesh* above the bottomlands of the rivers and along the ridges of the mountains of the North Coast. But the world we are bringing this population back to has radically changed and the ancestral guidance from older members of the condor culture that brought stability and sustained success to the population is not what it was. In the release programs, older condors are being delegated as mentors to the younger ones – but it's a brave new world for all of us now. Still, one thing we know for sure: being here now is the first thing necessary to being here later.

It's going to be a very good day when condors are here now.

Condors over the Klamath River. Artwork by Gary Bloomfield.

To see more of Gary's art, please visit:
www.flickr.com/photos/bloomfieldstudio/sets/72157642703538265/

Disturbed Thing

Conservation Update

Mother Nature Bats Last

Restoration of the Ocean Ranch Unit of Eel River Wildlife Area

By Chet Ogan

In the 1850s Humboldt Bay was discovered by Europeans. Since then, 95% of California's coastal salt marsh habitat has been removed. Which is why the fact that within the next few weeks, California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) is expected to release a draft Environmental Impact Report for restoration of the Ocean Ranch Unit, is such a victory. Part of the 2,600-acre CDFW-created Eel River Wildlife Area (ERWA), Ocean Ranch is an area located north of the mouth of the Eel River and northwest of the town of Loleta. With support from California Waterfowl Association and Ducks Unlimited, and using Wildlife Conservation Board funds, the Eel River Wildlife Area was created in 1988. Most of it is comprised of former ranchlands that were created by draining wetlands. The Ocean Ranch Unit, which sits between the north end of Eel River spit north to Table Bluff, became one of the areas added to this Wildlife Area.

According to the Ocean Ranch Restoration Project, "Restoration activities proposed under the Project would occur within an 850-acre restoration area generally bound by the Pacific Ocean on the west, Table Bluff (uplands) on the north, McNulty Slough on the east, and North Bay Slough on the south."

By the mid 1950s, ranchers in this area had built levees, and dikes, and installed tide gates to drain the wetlands and create pasture. However, heavy winter storms damaged the dikes and levees allowing shorebirds to re-colonize the area.

Redwood Region Audubon Society (RRAS) first became acutely aware of the importance of Ocean Ranch Unit of Eel River Wildlife Area to shorebirds, when it was brought to our attention by Humboldt State University student, Kristie Nelson. Ms. Nelson, an HSU wildlife undergrad, began looking at shorebirds in this area in the late 1990s. There was a levee breach in the winter of 1997-8 and heavy winter storms damaged dikes and levees that would flood the area. With the water then gradually receding, the mixing of salt and fresh water each spring tide caused algal and phytoplankton blooms and a tremendous amount of nutrition for zooplankton on which the shorebirds fed. More and more mudflat became exposed. The exposed mudflats afforded excellent viewing opportunities of the shorebirds migrating southward. Nelson noticed the area had a "3-to-4-week tidal cycle of brackish water, due to the dampening effect of the small breach and large catchment areas, providing a unique habitat for birds." Ms. Nelson noted that she found "more than three times as many birds and twice as many species, in lower tides." While ducks were primarily seen during the flooded period, she found more foraging by shorebirds during the period mudflats were exposed.

CDFW had been repairing the dikes to aid waterfowl, then sea level rise and more storms further damaged the dikes and levees. The agency realized it would be cheaper to allow Mother Nature to reclaim her former wetlands than to try to maintain the man-made structures. The Ocean Ranch Restoration Project includes removing tide gates, dikes, and levees; re-aligning McNulty Slough; and filling next to active ranchlands to reduce erosion potential. The project also involves dune restoration with removal of European beach grass to aid endangered Western Snowy Plover breeding populations and several endangered plant species. Removal of introduced cordgrass and restoration of the Eel River estuary and McNulty Slough for the benefit of tidewater goby and several salmonids will add mudflat and two habitats that have been heavily impacted by diking and filling of coastal wetlands, to the amount of available acreage available for wildlife.

In October 1998, noted ornithologist, Steve Howell was attending a Western Field Ornithologists conference hosted by Humboldt County birders, and spotted a Lesser Sand-Plover among hundreds of Semipalmated Plovers. As the spring tides tended toward neap tides, water was draining gradually from this wetland complex of mudflats and saltmarsh, exposing foraging opportunities for shorebirds. Other rare shorebirds were observed in previous and subsequent years. This brought the Ocean Ranch area to the attention of birders from all over the western states and it became recognized as a premier area to observe shorebirds and other waterfowl.

In the late 1990s, RRAS became alarmed when CDFW decided to repair the dikes and levees in preference of habitat for ducks and geese, disregarding the needs of migratory shorebirds. At this time, I was preparing paperwork that created Humboldt Bay Complex of Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network, which comprises 195 square miles around Humboldt Bay, from Centerville Beach north to Mad River mouth and inland to the mouths of Van Duzen River, Salmon Creek, Elk River, Freshwater Creek, Jacoby Creek, and Arcata Bottoms. This was the impetus for creating the Humboldt Bay Important Bird Area, which included the same boundaries.

Location of Ocean Ranch within the Eel River Wildlife Area. (Photo courtesy of CDFW.)

By the 2000's, CDFW had been repairing the dikes and levees and replacing tide gates. However, effects of sea level rise kept hammering at levees, continually causing damage. Realizing that Mother Nature had the upper hand, CDFW decided to opt for restoration of salt marsh and mudflats in this area. By 2013, an interagency Technical Advisory Committee had been created to look at the Ocean Ranch Restoration proposal. It was comprised of representatives from CDFW, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, Ducks Unlimited, California Waterfowl Association, the Wiyot Tribe, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries, and RRAS.

The environmental impact report is not yet public but expected to be released in the coming weeks. At that time, the public will be able to review and comment on it. Please stay tuned!

For more project information please go to https://wildlife.ca.gov/Science-Institute/News/cdfw-and-partners-work-to-restore-ocean-ranch-unit-in-humboldt-county

Left: Ocean Ranch. (Photo courtesy of CDFW.)
Below: Lesser Sand-Plover.

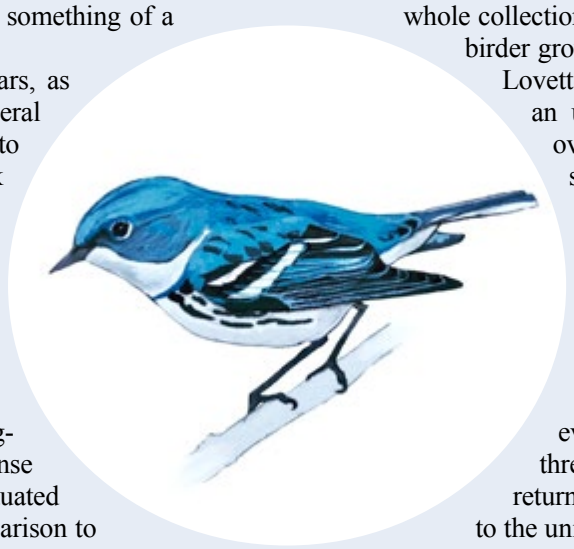
My Birding Beginnings

A Series by Amaya Bechler

Part II: The Nestling

"The difference between a beginning birder and an experienced birder is that the experienced one has made more mistakes."

Two years into my life as a bird enthusiast, this quotation really resonated with me since, as a 16-year-old birder, I was solidly into the "making mistakes" phase. I had only recently gained a basic knowledge of our local birds. Others, such as gulls and shorebirds, along with my inability to find rarities, proved frustrating. As I took my daily walk around the Arcata Marsh, occasionally I would misidentify a bird. I'd grit my teeth, then repeat to myself what had become something of a mantra: "I'm doing my best. *I'm learning*."



Being a young birder isn't so easy. The teenage years, as advertised, are full of socializing, gallivanting, and general excitement that comes with adolescence. But a perfect way to be completely isolated from your high school peers? Look no further than birding. With a generation so inundated with technology, it's especially out of character to be so invested in the natural world. None of my classmates could really relate to me after I took up the hobby.

Aside from that, the demographics of the birding community certainly didn't help. Except for a few HSU students, most of the birdwatchers in Humboldt are over 40. I was the only high-school-age birder. Therefore, young-birder-hood is quite lonely. My binoculars and driver's license became my most-valued "friends." Reflecting as a graduated senior, the brief, bright spots of rarity chases dim in comparison to the isolation. Fortunately, there is a solution: young birder camps.

In the past two years, I've attended a few of these events. Designed to attract bird-loving youths from across the country, the camps offered, for the first time, the opportunity to connect with other teens who shared my interests. One experience sticks out in particular. In July 2019, I visited Cornell University for the eBird-focused "Young Birders' Event." It was a mere three days that have since steered the course of my life.

Fifteen young birders from around the world (including Brazil, China, and the U.K.) met grad students, professors, and employees at the legendary Lab of Ornithology one sultry afternoon. The upcoming days would be some of the best of our lives, a sentiment shared by many of the attendees. We met ornithologists leading cutting-edge research. We chased wood warblers, including Mourning, and Worm-eating, and a Cerulean, which was a "lifer" for me! The founders of eBird taught us about how to better use the platform. We learned about the bright future of computerized wildlife research.

We also visited the Lab's extensive specimen collection – a room containing the taxidermized skins of nearly every bird species. "We never let students explore the whole collection – but once a year, we make an exception for the young birder group," explained Evolution and Ornithology professor Irby Lovette. He then showed us how to handle the specimens. It's an understatement to say we were thrilled. We marveled over preserved oilbirds, bellbirds, snowcaps, caracaras, shearwaters, wood warblers, and many more. Two hours have never passed faster. But the most important thing about the Cornell Young Birders' Event? We made friends with other birders from across the world. Connecting with other young people so genuinely over just a couple of days was truly special. It also made me dead-set on getting into Cornell.

"This experience is not intended to be a recruiting event," I remember one of the professors telling us as the three days came to an end. This was laughable – as soon as I returned home to Humboldt, I started working on my application to the university. I studied for the standardized tests. I wrote draft-upon-draft of the application essays. Afterall, how could I not want to return to one of the few communities I'd felt welcomed by; bird-y-ness, youth, and all? It would be a long and exhausting year in Humboldt, finishing senior year while anxiously waiting for college decisions. There was a big reward and an even bigger disappointment – but I'll save that for next time.

(All parts of Amaya's Series are available at www.rras.org *under "Newsletters.")*

Above: Painting of a Cerulean Warbler by Amaya Bechler.

Next Month: Finale – Part III, The Fledgling.

Driving While Birding

By Sarah Hobart

It's remarkable how much birding and driving have in common. Both require constant eye movement, excellent peripheral vision, and split-second reaction times, not to mention a pretty keen ear. In fact, it could be argued that the skills honed by birding make you a better driver overall. Unless, that is, you try to do both at the same time.

It's as plain as a fall warbler: birding and driving don't mix. Behind the wheel, your vigilance is meant for road hazards – immovable objects, pedestrians, furry animals, and other cars that swerve into your path while their drivers spoon up corn flakes and/or are in Zoom meetings – and not for ornithology.

The trouble is, when you love birds, it's nearly impossible to turn off the birder in you. At the same time your driving brain is registering a blue minivan bearing down on you at three o'clock, your bird brain is noting a Steller's Jay at nine, a brilliant Western Tanager at eleven, and a Peregrine Falcon hunkered down on a telephone pole dead ahead. Your eyes are darting around like a hummingbird on crack.

Naturally, as a dedicated defensive driver, you've never, *ever* drifted over the rumble strip into the breakdown lane while following the flight of a suspected Swainson's Hawk, or stopped in the middle of the street to snap a quick photo of a *Mimus polyglottos* in perfect light, or exceeded the posted speed limit by double digits chasing down a hot bird report. Nor have you ever been assured by other drivers that you're number one after pulling the fastest U-turn in history because that flash of yellow and black might – just might – be a Hooded Warbler (since they're everywhere this year!)

Scientific evidence has shown that the more; rare, striking, or way-the-heck-out-of-its-range the bird, the more likely it is to flash across your field of view when you're powerless to stop. You're in bumper-to-bumper traffic. Or merging onto 101. Or entering a roundabout – the very concept of which is to keep you moving 'round and about. By the time you find a safe place to pull over, that bird is gone, gone, gone. And it was probably a lifer.

Your problems don't end even if you do manage to get off the road. The other day I was parked off the shoulder of Samoa Boulevard – I mean waaay off, so that stalks of fennel were poking through the doorframe and a Lesser Goldfinch was evaluating my glove box as a potential nesting site – when a CHP vehicle pulled up and an officer stepped out. "Car trouble, ma'am?" he said.

"Uh, White-Tailed Kite."

I pointed; "Beautiful, isn't it?"

Fingers tapping lightly on his ticket book, "Stunning," he said. I decided to forego any photos and move right along.

It's a delicate balance. We're only human after all. And having already been on the wrong end of a distracted driver encounter, I'm committed to keeping my eyes on the road and my hands at ten and two o'clock – and off my bins. Unless a Magnificent Frigatebird sails over the sunroof as I'm motoring down the freeway.

Then all bets are off.

Above: Photo by Sarah Hobart.
Watermark: Magnificent Frigatebird.