

# The Sandpiper

February 2023



Redwood Region Audubon Society

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

Join RRAS for our Annual Banquet and Auction on Saturday, February 18th, at the Arcata D Street Neighborhood Center, 13th and D streets. The event will begin with a social hour at 5:30 p.m. and dinner at 6:30, followed by a presentation by Dr. Vitek Jirinec on:

## Climate Change Is Transforming the Bodies of Birds!

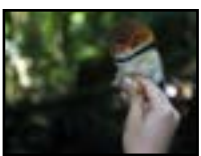
Vitek will talk about his studies of Amazonian birds, including their quickly evolving responses to climate change, and his other recent bird studies and adventures. He states "...most of the bird species we catch in mist nets are shifting size and shape in response to climate change. Why should the general public care about this?



Individual lifestyle choices of people in distant places – like us here in Humboldt County – have consequences for such a bizarre thing as the size and shape of birds in the middle of Amazonia. If that doesn't put the 'global' in global climate change, I don't know what does."



Vitek moved to the US from Prague, Czech Republic. He received his BS in Wildlife Management at Humboldt State University in 2010, MS in Biology at the College of William and Mary in 2015, and PhD at Louisiana State University in Renewable Natural Resources in 2021. His dissertation research on the response of rainforest birds to the shifting climate in the pristine Amazon rainforest received broad coverage in popular media, including NPR, National Geographic, NBC, and the National Audubon Society.



Come out and commune with the birding/conservation community. We would love to see you there! Tickets for the banquet are \$35 per person until February 11, when the price will rise to \$50. To get a ticket send a check made out to RRAS to P.O. Box 1054, Eureka, CA 95502, or email [gary@jacobycreek.net](mailto:gary@jacobycreek.net) with "Banquet" in the subject line, or phone (707) 496-6581. The last day to make reservations is February 16th.

We are seeking auction item donations such as art, optical equipment, and books. Gift certificates to local businesses are appreciated. We encourage you to ask your favorite business for a donation item! If you have auction items to donate or can help with the banquet, please email [gailkenny@gmail.com](mailto:gailkenny@gmail.com).

Above right: Vitek with an Amazonian Motmot (*Momotus momota*). Photo by Philip Stouffer. Top left: Scale-backed Antbird (*Willisornis poecilinotus*). Photo by Cameron Rutt. Bottom left: Collared Puffbird (*Bucco capensis*). Photo by Vitek Jirinec.

## Calling All Student Writers & Artists

RRAS is sponsoring our 18th annual *Student Nature Writing Contest*. Up to six cash prizes will be awarded for the best essay(s) or poem(s) on "What Nature Means to Me" by Humboldt or Del Norte County students in grades 4 through 12. First-place winners will be published in the *Sandpiper*, and all winners will be published in a booklet posted on the website by mid-May.

For the 20th year, Friends of the Arcata Marsh and RRAS are co-sponsoring their *Student Bird Art Contest*, with up to \$600 in prizes to be awarded to Humboldt County students from kindergarten through high school who submit a drawing of one of forty suggested species or another bird seen locally. Prizes also will be awarded for the best renditions of a bird in its natural habitat.

**Entries must be received by 5 p.m. Saturday, March 18**

The contests are being held in conjunction with the Godwit Days Spring Migration Bird Festival. Entries will be judged by local wildlife artists and educators. All entries will be displayed during the festival (April 13-16) in the lobby and hallways of the Arcata Community Center, and awards will be presented the morning of Saturday, April 15.

Color copies of winning artwork will be shown at the Arcata Marsh Interpretive Center during May and June. A free public reception is being planned, with a tentative date of Friday, May 19.

Details and complete submission instructions are posted at [www.godwitdays.org](http://www.godwitdays.org), [www.rras.org](http://www.rras.org), or [www.arcatamarshfriends.org](http://www.arcatamarshfriends.org), or can be picked up at the Interpretive Center, 569 South G Street, Arcata. Email questions to [sueleskiw1@gmail.com](mailto:sueleskiw1@gmail.com).

## FIELD TRIPS IN FEBRUARY!

**Sat. Feb. 4<sup>th</sup>** – 8:30-11am. Birding at Arcata Marsh, led by Chet Ogan. Bring binoculars and a scope if you have one and meet at the south end of I Street (Klopp Lake). Reservations not required.

**Sat. Feb. 11<sup>th</sup>** – 8:30-11am. Arcata Marsh, led by Kathryn Wendel.

**Sun. Feb. 12<sup>th</sup>** – 9-11am. Humboldt Bay National Wildlife Refuge with leader Ralph Bucher. Meet at the Visitor Center.

**Sun. Feb. 12<sup>th</sup> – 9-noon. Women and Girls' Birding Trip** – Join Susan Penn and Susan O'Connor on a birding adventure to explore a tiny portion of the Humboldt Bay National Wildlife Refuge, then take a drive along a back road toward Loleta. Meet at the Hookton Slough Unit at 9 a.m., looking for grebes, ducks, pelicans, shorebirds. We may see meadowlarks, swans, and Surf Scoters, too! From there we will drive toward Loleta, stopping to watch for raptors, and checking ponds for freshwater-loving birds. We will circle back and end our adventure at the Hookton Slough Refuge.

*Driving directions to the Hookton Slough Unit:* Take exit 696 off Highway 101.

Northbound, turn left and go west over the overpass and take a right on Hookton Road. Follow the road about 1.2 miles and you will see the signed turnoff to the parking lot on your right.

Southbound, go straight ahead from the off-ramp stop sign. Follow Hookton Road west about 1.2 miles, and take the signed turnoff down to the parking lot. *Contact Susan Penn with questions, [susanpenn60@gmail.com](mailto:susanpenn60@gmail.com).*

**Sat. Feb. 18<sup>th</sup>** – 8:30-11am. Arcata Marsh, led by Michael Morris.

**Sun. Feb. 19<sup>th</sup>** – 9-11am. Ralph Bucher will lead a walk on the Eureka Waterfront. This trail is paved and is wheelchair accessible.

**Sat. Feb. 25<sup>th</sup>** – 8:30-11am. Arcata Marsh, led by Elizabeth Meisman.

**Sat. Feb. 25<sup>th</sup>** – 9-11 am. 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](mailto:jeremy.cashen@yahoo.com) or 214-605-7368 for more information.

\*Contact Ralph at [thebook@reninet.com](mailto:thebook@reninet.com) for any walks he leads and all Marsh walks.

\*Contact Janelle Chojnacki at [janelle.choj\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:janelle.choj[at]gmail.com) for information on all other walks.

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## President's Column

by Gail Kenny

In early December, Rob Fowler reported a rare Nelson's Sparrow in the McDaniel Slough area of the Arcata Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary. I'm not the rare bird chaser I once was, but if the bird sticks around and it fits my schedule, I will take the time to look for it. Later in December, when this sparrow was still being seen, I finally looked it up on my list and discovered I had not seen a Nelson's Sparrow before. It was time to look for this rare sparrow.

On Christmas Eve, I decided, along with my daughter and Janet Stock, to look for the Nelson's Sparrow. As we headed to the spot, we ran into Kathryn Wendel, a RRAS Board Member who led the Arcata Marsh walk that morning, along with Ken Burton, and some other marsh walk participants. They had looked for the sparrow but had not seen it, but they talked to someone else who had seen it that morning. As luck would have it, Rob Fowler showed up just behind us to look for the bird. It turns out at least two Nelson's Sparrows had been seen. A King Tide made the experience even more interesting. It was a lovely sunny day and not too cold. There were lots of Savannah Sparrows to sift through while looking for the rare sparrows.

We were soon joined by longtime Humboldt birders Gary and Lauren Lester. As we looked for the sparrows, Gary and Rob remarked that Gary had seen Nelson's Sparrows four times in Humboldt County over the years, most of them at the Arcata Marsh in this same area. I have been actively birding in Humboldt since the 1980s. How had I not seen a Nelson's Sparrow before? With the help of Rob's sharp eyes and ears we were soon rewarded with both Nelson's Sparrows. We all got okay, but fleeting, looks at them. Eventually, the

pair flew into the bushes right next to us, where we got some more fleeting looks. These birds did not sit still for us to study them. What I noticed about the Nelson's Sparrows was the warm orange wash on their head and neck and the two black crown stripes. One of the pair of these birds was brighter than the other.

Later that day, I added Nelson's Sparrow to my life list, first in handwritten notes in my 1987 *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, and second, in a free app called Bird Journal that I compiled my life list in awhile back.

When I went to the index of the Nat Geo guide to tick the name of Nelson's Sparrow and note the date and place, I discovered it was not in the index. That means it probably got lumped or split since this guide was published in 1987. I googled Nelson's Sparrow and discovered it has been split from Sharp-Tailed Sparrow into Saltmarsh Sparrow and Nelson's Sparrow. The Saltmarsh Sparrow range is a narrow band along the Atlantic Coast. Then I found a note in the index of my old field guide with Sharp-Tailed Sparrow ticked, the date of 5/11/90 and location Arcata. This was not a lifer. The Nelson's Sparrow is the same species as the Sharp-Tailed Sparrow I had seen in 1990, most likely one of the birds Gary had seen too. I didn't mind that it wasn't a lifer. I really did enjoy the experience of getting out and seeing this pretty sparrow for the second time in my life. What I also appreciated about this experience was the birding community. At any rare bird chase, it is fun to see who else is there and catch up with each other.



Photo of Nelson's Sparrow by Rob Fowler.

**Treasurer Needed:** We are seeking a volunteer treasurer. The treasurer keeps the books for our bank accounts, makes deposits and writes checks, reports to the board, and helps create the annual budget. Please email Gail at gailkenny@gmail.com if you are interested or want more information.

## Bird News Round-Up

Compiled by Gina Rogers

**It's a Bird Emergency -- More Than Half of U.S. Birds in Decline:** A new report issued by a 33-organization consortium produces a clarion call for increasing conservation efforts, providing concrete data on plummeting bird populations across almost all habitats. The *State of the Birds Report 2022* indicates that three billion birds have been lost in the past fifty years, including one in four breeding birds. It identifies seventy different bird species (such as the Rufous Hummingbird, Lesser Yellowlegs, and Black Scoter) as *Tipping Point* birds, all shown to have lost at least half of their populations in the past fifty years. One bright spot is surging waterfowl and waterbird populations, up 34 percent and 18 percent, respectively, reflecting the success of forty years of concerted wetland conservation. Intensifying conservation efforts are called for, especially as climate-induced natural disasters, habitat loss, and land degradation continue to worsen the outlook for birds.

**Drew Lanham Wins MacArthur Genius Award:** J. Drew Lanham, a Black ornithologist who teaches at Clemson University, was one of fifteen people awarded MacArthur Foundation "genius" awards. Lanham was heralded for "creating a new model of conservation that combines conservation science with personal, historical, and cultural narratives of nature." His research and teaching focus on the impacts of forest management on birds and other wildlife. Lanham received national attention

when he published an essay in 2013 called "9 Rules for the Black Birdwatcher," spotlighting how societal racism affects the experience of Black birders.

**Avian Flu Reaches Humboldt County:** The first cases of avian flu (Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza) in wild birds were officially reported in November, including a Turkey Vulture carcass found in Orick, Cackling Geese and a Greater White-fronted Goose from the Humboldt Wildlife Care Center (HWCC), and several Ravens. This was four months after California's first confirmed case back in July.

In response, the Sequoia Park Zoo relocated its Chilean flamingo flock to the behind-the-scenes Animal Care Center, closed the free-flight aviary, and has put increased biosecurity measures in place. The HWCC is still taking in wild birds in need of care under strict protocols while also monitoring the virus closely. The Northern California Condor Restoration Program, managed by the Yurok Tribe in cooperation with several other agencies, made the difficult decision to relocate their mentor bird, the seven-year-old male known as Condor 746. He was moved to a better-protected flight pen at the Condor Recovery Center at the Oakland Zoo.

If you see a sick bird, you are urged to call the HWCC at 707-822-8839. Reducing bird feeder use and cleaning feeders regularly is also encouraged. California Dept. of Fish and Wildlife reports that, while infection with avian flu viruses among songbirds appears to be relatively rare, feeding and providing water to wild birds in ways that increase congregations in any one area is generally discouraged.

## Fields Landing to Cape Mendocino: Pelagic Birding in Humboldt, By Ken Burton

Recreational opportunities to view wildlife at sea in Humboldt are few and far between. Unlike most other coastal California counties, we have no pelagic tour operators. Thus, when veteran marine biologist Gary Friedrichsen recently invited me to join him and some friends on a combined fishing and birdwatching foray, I jumped on it without hesitation, even though I don't fish anymore.

Finding a day when visibility and sea conditions meshed with our schedules was predictably tricky, but we finally settled on a Monday morning in September. Western Gulls lined the docks as we set out from Fields Landing on glassy calm water against a beautiful sunrise. Cormorants and pelicans moved aside to let us pass while the sea lions on the channel markers didn't even appear to wake up.

Despite the auspicious start, it was obvious as soon as we cleared the jetties at the mouth of the bay that we were not going to get the calm sea conditions Gary had been led to expect. Although it wasn't particularly windy, the chop and swell were substantial, and the little boat was tossed around like a toy as we took a southwest tack towards the Eel River canyon.

Trying to keep moving birds in view with binoculars is hard enough on dry land. Doing it when you and the environment are also moving, in every conceivable direction, takes it to a whole new level of challenge and frustration. Pelagic birding is not for the faint of heart. All else being equal, the bigger the boat, the more stable it is; Gary's is tiny, great for fishing but not ideal for birding under the conditions we were experiencing. If this had been primarily a birding trip, we might have turned back at that point, but as it was mainly a fishing trip, we soldiered on.

It's always a thrill on a pelagic trip to see the first tubenoses. "Tubenoses" is the vernacular term for birds in the order Procellariiformes, which spend most of their lives at sea and are seldom, if ever, seen from land away from breeding sites. The word comes from tubelike structures on their bills that excrete salt and increase the birds' olfactory sensitivity, enabling them to locate food at sea and, for some species, their nest sites in the dark. You usually need to be a few miles out before you begin seeing them.

As expected, our first tubenoses were Sooty Shearwaters, generally the commonest tubenoses in our region. These dark brown, gull-sized birds nest in Australia and New Zealand during the Austral summer and spend most of the rest of the year roaming the world's oceans. Like other shearwaters, they have a stiff-winged, arcing flight with rapid, shallow wingbeats, often gliding with their wings on a vertical axis.

Soon we began picking up Buller's and Pink-footed Shearwaters as well. These species nest on only a few islands off New Zealand and Chile, respectively, and show up here during our summer and fall. We passed several Rhinoceros Auklets (which are actually puffins), which paddled out of our way if they could, diving or flying only if we got too close. Dozens of Cassin's Auklets, chunky, softball-sized gray birds, exploded off the water in front of us, their little wings churning furiously to

get out of our path. It was proving to be a good day, for us if not necessarily for the auklets.

Finally, about five miles from the bay mouth, we saw our first albatross. Albatrosses are the largest seabirds, with wings that seem to go on forever, enabling them to quite literally circle the globe without flapping, and seeing them in their element is awe-inspiring. Nearly all albatrosses here are Black-footed, relatively small albatrosses that nest almost exclusively on the outer Hawaiian Islands. Remarkably, these birds come here from Hawaii to collect food that they then take back to their chicks by regurgitation — such is the speed and efficiency of their flight.



Upon reaching the canyon, the boat's thermometer registered a water temperature of 63°F, and as we set gear for albacore, a small, dark, long-winged seabird flew by: a storm-petrel!

Storm-petrels are the smallest tubenoses and among the smallest of all seabirds, giving the impression of marine swallows. The expected dark storm-petrel in our area is Leach's, which has a white rump. Viewing conditions were still challenging, to say the least, but I sure didn't see a white rump on this bird. Soon we began seeing others, and I realized they were Ashy Storm-Petrels, normally found farther south and considered rare here. Then Gary called out, "Black Storm-Petrel!" Whoa! That's another southern species and not seen in the region since 1990! I had missed it, but before long we passed a concentration of about 100 Ashy and at least 10

Black Storm-Petrels! Gary, who has spent thousands of hours at sea off Humboldt, said he'd never seen so many storm-petrels at once here; this was an *event*, one soon to be repeated by several later birding groups who saw even more than we. And then, to top it off, a South Polar Skua, a predatory, gull-like species that breeds, as its name implies, in Antarctica, appeared.

These three species were all ones I'd never seen in Humboldt and I was ecstatic. Part of my euphoria was due to the fact that they put me into Humboldt's "400 Club," a group of about two dozen birders who have seen or heard at least 400 native bird species in the county. It was a goal I'd been chasing for years. There aren't a whole lot of counties where it's even possible.

We never did catch any albacore. Instead, we headed inshore towards Cape Mendocino for rockfish. On the way home, the sea flattened out as if mocking us, but we sure didn't feel as if it had gotten the better of us that day!

Photos: Top right: Black Storm-Petrel, Benson Halsey, Arizona Field Ornithologists (AZFO). Center: Black-footed Albatross, Alaska Dept. of Fish & Game. Right: Pink-footed Shearwater, Ken Burton.



Woodley Island, Oct. 2021

### Godwit Days Returns in 2023

The Arcata Community Center will once again be the location for this spring's Bird Migration Festival (April 13-16). This is the first time in four years that this event approaches "normal," as the festival was cancelled in 2020, online only in 2021, and with limited in-person field trips in 2022.

The festival's return to the Community Center means that we will be able to display all of the entries in the Student Bird Art Contest in the hallways and also hold our Saturday morning awards ceremony. (See the article on page 1 of the *Sandpiper* for more about the annual art and writing contests.)

RRAS and Friends of the Arcata Marsh (FOAM) are teaming up to co-organize the free Godwit Days opening reception from 5 to 6:30 p.m. on Friday, April 14, at the Community Center. Both groups will be recruiting help to staff the event, with tasks ranging from bartending or washing dishes, to hanging student art or staffing informational booths, to helping with a possible nature craft "mega-palooza" free event on Sunday, April 16.

So, mark your calendars to sign up for field trips led by knowledgeable guides (the schedule will launch in January at [www.godwitdays.org](http://www.godwitdays.org)) and all the ancillary activities that make Godwit Days so special.

## “Bird Talk Around Town,” by Jeremy Cashen

Featuring interviews with locals, on all things bird!

Jeremy met Dalton (in photo, by Jeremy) when he interviewed for a job with his company. He was hired, and they have gotten to know each other well.

**Jeremy:** First off, what’s your favorite bird?

**Dalton:** That’s a tough one. I really like a lot of different birds, but for the sake of answering the question, I’ll say mergansers. I remember my first time walking around the Redwood Creek area and seeing a bunch of families of mergansers. It was so cool to see all the babies following the mom and running super fast across the water. Besides mergansers, I like all different kinds of raptors.

**Jeremy:** You run a tour company called Wildtrail Tours, where you lead biking and hiking tours, and also rent bikes to people who want to go out on their own. How’d you get into the eco-tourism business?

**Dalton:** Well, in general I knew I wanted to own my own business. I wanted to be my own boss, work on my own terms, and have the freedom to do my own thing. I’ve always been really into hiking and biking and the outdoors as a whole, and when I moved to Humboldt, I noticed that there was a gap in the local tourism industry. I figured that I could take advantage of this gap and fill a desired niche. Logistics aside, I started, and continue, to do tours because I love to give people unforgettable experiences and memories that will last a lifetime. I remember some of my first inspiring experiences of the natural world, and I want to give people that same thing.

I love to know that I am facilitating a love and wonder of the planet and that my work may create a new passion or excitement for the environment.

**Jeremy:** So, with your love of the natural world, are you interested in birding or wildlife observation?

**Dalton:** Although I love the outdoors, I’ve never really birded much before. But I will say that I have started to notice birds more recently. I remember when I lived in Iowa I saw a swarm of about 300 Starlings flying and changing directions quickly in unison. It was quite an amazing sight. I definitely feel as though birds are special, and I recognize their awesomeness.

**Jeremy:** What got you interested in the environment?

**Dalton:** I was always outdoors when I was younger. Starting at a young age, I would go camping very regularly, and I was always out in the elements. I was also an Eagle Scout. I did the whole program from Cub Scout on. A lot of people don’t get that experience at a young age, so I enjoy sharing the beauty of the outdoors with people who may be just starting to discover its greatness.



## A Coalition of Acorn Woodpeckers

By Susan Penn

I became enchanted with Acorn Woodpeckers a few years ago when I started spending time inland near Blocksburg, an area abundant in oaks and acorns. They wake me up in the morning with their long, slightly nasal “ha ha, ha ha” phrases, often followed with a rolling trill. They seem to start the day laughing! If you are lucky enough to be near one of their roosting trees, the air soon fills with their cheerful chatter.



Their antics and clownish faces always make me smile. They are medium-sized woodpeckers with black-and-white faces above a fancy black neck ruffle. Light yellow eyes stare out from the black that extends from the sides of their heads down their back. And, as any good woodpecker must, they sport a red crown.

During the day, Acorn Woodpeckers move around in groups, constantly interacting and talking with each other. In the summer, they love playing in a bird bath! I learned that they live in extended-family groups called *coalitions*. These coalitions usually have one to three breeding females, up to eight breeding males, and a number of younger birds from recent broods. Young birds stay with their family group for several years. During that time, they participate in all the extensive household activities.



The most obvious of these activities is the creation and maintenance of acorn trees, also referred to as *granaries*. Acorn Woodpeckers drill holes into dead trees, or into the bark of living trees, and stuff acorns into them. A single tree may have as many as 50,000 acorns stored in it. As the acorns dry and shrink, they are moved to smaller, snugger holes, to

reduce the predation by other birds, especially Steller’s Jays, Spotted Towhees, and White-breasted Nuthatches.

The scientific name for the Acorn Woodpecker is *Melanerpes formicivorus* – black creeping anteater. These birds do eat ants, along with other insects, grubs, flying insects, fruit, lizards, and eggs. But it is the acorns that allow them to avoid

migrating. If they have a well-filled granary, they may even nest in the fall, one of the few birds to do so.

In conjunction with their family structure, these birds have an unusual breeding practice which is shared by just 9 percent of bird species – polygynandry. In a nutshell, males and females of breeding age mate freely. This saves the birds the energy of looking for a mate, and helps with genetic diversity. It is typical for breeding males to be brothers, and breeding females to be sisters, but intra-family breeding does not occur.

Coalitions excavate cavities in dead trees, or dead branches of living trees. Some of these are used as roosting sites, and one is reserved for nesting. All the females lay their eggs in the same nest. Females lay three to seven eggs, and as many as seventeen eggs have been found in a single nest cavity.

It is common for a female to destroy eggs that are already in the nest when she lays her eggs. Fortunately, once the birds are laying in sync, this practice stops. This habit seems counter-productive to me, but scientists think there may be advantages to having the chicks be the same age. Once the eggs are laid, the entire coalition helps with incubation and with feeding the young.

You won’t find these birds on the coast, as they are truly dependent on acorns. But if you find yourself in an area with oaks, a coalition of Acorn Woodpeckers is likely to announce its presence. They are fun birds to get to know!

Acorn Woodpecker photos: Top right by Joseph Morlan; left by Pauhana, courtesy Birdforum.

