



# The Sandpiper



October 2024

Redwood Region Audubon Society

www.rras.org

Join us on Thursday, October 17, for a presentation on:

**Planned Restoration of Redwood and Prairie Creeks**, by Mary Burke, North Coast Regional Manager of California Trout  
Please see [rras.org](http://rras.org) for a full description of the program. Our programs are held at Six Rivers Masonic Lodge, 251 Bayside Road, Arcata, or go to our website for the Zoom link. Drinks and goodies are served at 7:00 p.m., the program begins at 7:30.

## A Look Back at Birding the Arcata Marsh in Summer

By Judith Brown & Gina Rogers

Fall birding is well under way, but we can look back on an exceptional summer season of RRAS Saturday walks. Said to be a slow season for birding, summer 2024 outings drew large groups of birders and rewarded them with high-quality sightings, if not the quantities of birds often seen. As shorebirds tapered off, it meant searching for the unusual suspects in the brushy, reedy habitat. Two birds not commonly seen made more than one appearance—a Green Heron and Virginia Rail—both “posing” long enough for photographs. In June, Blue-winged Teal were still to be found, and Wood Ducks, with young, were in full view on Allen Marsh and Hauser Marsh on more than one walk. Then there were the chicks and fledglings—noisy crows, hungry goldfinches, and a school of young Mallards, who didn’t seem to know they aren’t diving ducks.



On August 31, birders were treated to a truly rare sight. We were at the Bay end of Butcher Slough, across from No Name Pond, when Sophie, a student at College of the Redwoods, asked, “What is that white bird over there?” Leader Tamar Danufsky put her binoculars on it, paused, and then started getting excited. Amidst a number of Least Sandpipers was an all-white bird that

looked bigger than the others. On closer inspection, it really was an all-white image of its neighbors. Why does it look so big? White birds just look big, it’s an optical illusion. When we got it in the scope, it was the same size as the others.

Next question, is it an *albino* sandpiper or is it *leucistic*? Albino birds completely lack the natural pigment known as melanin, so they really are almost totally white with red or pink eyes. This contrasts with leucistic birds which produce melanin but can’t deposit it into their feathers. Through the scope, the bird was almost completely white, with maybe a little dusting of brown near its head.

Continued on next page

## RRAS FIELD TRIPS IN OCTOBER

**Every Saturday, 8:30-11am.** Join RRAS at the Arcata Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary for a free guided field trip with an experienced birder. The meet-up spot is the parking area at the end of I St. (Klopp Lake). Bring binoculars and scopes if you have them. If not, come on out anyway!

*Trip leaders for October:* Oct 5, Tamar Danufsky ~ Oct 12, Mark Colwell ~ Oct 19, Dan Greaney ~ Oct 26, Janelle Chojnacki

### More Field Trips

**Saturday, Oct 5. Fall pelagic trip** aboard the *Steller Sunrise*, with trip leaders Sean McAllister, Kathryn Wendel, and John Sterling. See the article on page 2 for details.

**Sunday, Oct 6, 11am-2pm.** Dragonflies and Birds! Join Sandra von Arb, coauthor of the new book, *Dragonflies of California*, for late-season dragonfly hunting and birding at the Arcata Marsh. Learn how to find and identify dragonflies and damselflies while also birding at the region’s most outstanding birding site. Meet at the Interpretive Center (569 South G Street). Contact Sandra at [sandra@pacnwbio.com](mailto:sandra@pacnwbio.com), or Sean McAllister (707-496-8790 / [whiteouters@gmail.com](mailto:whiteouters@gmail.com)) for more information.

**Saturday, Oct 12, 8-11am.** Mark Morrissette will lead a unique and educational trip to *Potowat Health Village*. We will be birdwatching and touring the trail system that winds through the integrated landscape surrounding the clinic. Come see the wildlife using the Ku’ wah-dah-wilth Restoration Area, organic permaculture garden, and stormwater system that will maintain wetlands on the village conservation easement. Meet in the parking lot at the end of Weot Road (turn east between the fire department and Mad River Hospital off Janes Road, Arcata). For more information call Mark at 707-502-9589 or Sean McAllister (707-496-8790 / [whiteouters@gmail.com](mailto:whiteouters@gmail.com)).

**Sunday, Oct 13, 9-11am.** Join trip leader Ralph Bucher for a walk at the Humboldt Bay National Wildlife Refuge. This two-mile walk is along a wide, flat, gravel-packed trail easily accessible on foot. Email Ralph to sign up at [thebook\[at\]reninet.com](mailto:thebook[at]reninet.com).

**Sunday, Oct 20, 9-11am.** Ralph Bucher leads a walk on the Eureka Waterfront Trail, starting at the foot of Del Norte Street and continuing on a flat, paved trail that is **wheelchair accessible**. This relatively urban trail offers the potential to observe a variety of species on the bay and along the trail. Email Ralph to sign up at [thebook\[at\]reninet.com](mailto:thebook[at]reninet.com). Continued on next page

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THE SANDPIPER:  
Editor ..... Judi Brown  
Contributing Writer/Editor ..... Gina Rogers  
Proofreader ..... Pia Gabriel  
*The Sandpiper is published eleven times a year by*  
Redwood Region Audubon Society  
P.O. Box 1054, Eureka, CA 95502

## RRAS Field Trips, continued from page 1

**Saturday, Oct 26, 9-11am.** Wigi Wetlands Volunteer Workday. Help create bird-friendly native habitats and restore a section of the bay trail behind Bayshore Mall by removing invasive plants and trash. Bring water and gloves. We provide tools and snacks. Contact Susan Penn at [susanpenn60@gmail.com](mailto:susanpenn60@gmail.com) for more information.

**Saturday, Oct 26, time TBD.** Join RRAS in Southern Humboldt for a free guided bird walk, trip leader TBD. Call Ann Constantino, 707-296-8720, for confirmation and time and meeting place.

**Sunday, Oct 27, 8:30-11:30am.** Humboldt Bay NWR--Lanphere Dunes Unit. Join Ken Burton on a birding hike in this closed-to-the-public unit of the refuge, which includes slough, riparian forest, dune forest, restored dune, dune hollow, and ocean beach habitats. We'll be hiking several miles, much of it on sand. Meet Ken ([shrikethree@gmail.com](mailto:shrikethree@gmail.com)) at Pacific Union Elementary School to carpool to the refuge; all participants will be required to carpool and to stay for the entire outing. No RSVP necessary.

## President's Column

By Kathryn Wendel

With summer now over, Redwood Region Audubon is back to our regular program schedule of hosting a talk every third Thursday of the month at the Masonic Lodge in Bayside. Programs usually focus on birds but occasionally cover other topics, always with a focus on wildlife and conservation. You do not need to be a member of Audubon to join these free talks, they are open to the public and everyone is welcome. Please join us at 7:00 p.m. at the next program on October 17, and enjoy refreshments and socializing with other wildlife lovers ahead of the talk, which usually lasts about 45 minutes.

Speaking of the Masonic Lodge, RRAS is pleased to be hosting a Christmas Bird Count compilation gathering this year at the Lodge on December 14, after the Arcata Count. We will



provide dinner and beverages, and are looking for volunteers to help out with this free event to thank the Christmas Bird Count birders and supporters. Please email me at [president@rras.org](mailto:president@rras.org) if you are interested in volunteering. We need everything from setup to managing food to cleanup afterwards.

RRAS would also like to introduce our newest board member and Wigi Wetlands coordinator: Samantha Bacon. Samantha is a Wildlife student at Cal Poly Humboldt, and will be coordinating the Wigi Wetlands cleanup and habitat restoration on the fourth Saturday of every month. If you are interested in contributing to the restoration of this important section of wildlife habitat behind the Bayshore Mall, we meet in the parking lot behind Wal-Mart at 9:00 a.m. and would love to see you there! Check out our website ([rras.org](http://rras.org)) for more details regarding this monthly cleanup.

## RRAS Pelagic Trip — October 5

We are pleased to offer our first ever fall pelagic trip aboard the *Steller Sunrise*, a U.S. Coast Guard certified 43-foot vessel with 360-degree viewing and a bathroom. Join trip leaders Sean McAllister, Kathryn Wendel, and John Sterling for this opportunity to go offshore and see ocean birds not typically seen from land.

The trip follows the Eel River Canyon 15 to 20 miles offshore, where we hope to see albatross, shearwaters, fulmars, auklets, and jaegers, and possibly storm-petrels or Tufted Puffin. Marine mammals such as humpback whales, Pacific white-sided dolphins, and northern fur seals are also a possibility. Dress in layers and bring a lunch, water, sunscreen, optics cloth like a bandana to keep your optics and camera lens clean, and take all the precautions one would when going out on the ocean (such as taking seasickness medication, avoiding alcohol the night before, etc.). Binoculars and cameras are welcome, but spotting scopes are not permitted or appropriate.

Trip cost is \$150 cash/check, or \$160 online. Space is limited. Email [president@rras.org](mailto:president@rras.org) for details about time and place and to sign up.

## Recent Sightings

Summer pelagic trips off the coast have yielded rare bird sightings, including the first confirmed county record Least Storm-Petrel on August 17 and Guadalupe Murrelets on September 7.

## Birding the Marsh in Summer, continued from page 1

But we didn't get a good enough look at the eyes to verify, so leucistic is the safer call. Finally, how do you know it is a Least and not a Western Sandpiper? The light was not great for identifying yellow legs of the Least versus black for the Western. Instead, looking at the breast of the non-albino birds, we could see they were brownish, not the brighter all-white breast you'd see on the Western. Later on the walk, we saw a Least and Western side-by-side and could see just how vibrant white the Western's breast was and its slightly bigger size.

Last but by far not least were the frequent otter sightings—many of them mothers with pups learning how to fish for themselves. On one walk, we were held spellbound for about twenty minutes watching a foursome just below us in Klopp Lake as they slithered through the water after fish. A Great Egret stood near them on the bank, spearing its own catch, and at one point a Great Blue Heron flew in.



Photos: page 1, Green Heron by Daniil Suchkov; diving Mallard ducklings by Alex Tey (Macaulay Library); above, leucistic Least Sandpiper by Leah Alcyon

## Duck-Watching: Much More than Meets the Eye

By Dan Greaney

“Form follows function,” say the architects, and ducks seem not to demur, especially if “form” is interpreted broadly to include not just shape but all features. The duck form has been pretty successful, populating Earth for some 67 million years, about 60 million more than we mere hominids.

Like virtually all the planet’s life forms bigger than bacteria, ducks practice sexual reproduction, which delivers, along with some stunning flamboyance, successful adaptations to the manifold habitats of our planet. Its capacity for mixing genes has produced striking differences in plumage between males and females; ducks that dive and ducks that dabble; bills nuanced to pick or strain different foods from fields or water and mud, or to snatch and hold struggling fish, or to break mussels from their foothold.

Courtship in ducks begins in the fall as males come out of their eclipse plumage into their colorful duds. Dressed to impress, they flap, wing-stretch, and head-bob to show off their fitness. The females may squawk to incite male competition, and join in the courtship dance with their own head-bobs and limbo moves. Pairs form and continue to cement their relationship through the winter months. Through physical proximity, the male, or drake, may be guarding the hen from other males as much as anything else. If his vigilance flags, and perhaps regardless, when she becomes fertile, extra-pair copulations can be frequent and forced.

The hen ducks go forward with their essential work. They are the consummate child-rearers. They enter a period of voracious eating and shape their nests, most often a reedy depression with overhanging vegetation, although a few species—familarly wood ducks, buffleheads, goldeneyes, and mergansers—nest in cavities up to eighty feet above ground. They lay an egg or two a day, up to over a dozen in total. The eggs are large, and can weigh in total nearly half the hen’s



own weight. Once her nest is full—sometimes including eggs volunteered by another hen—she begins to incubate. Perhaps incubation is a needed rest period after the labor of producing eggs, but it is not really a carefree time, either. When she occasionally leaves the nest to feed or defecate, she must guard

against revealing its location. While sitting, she regularly turns the eggs, rotating the perimeter eggs into the center under her brood patch. This distributes her body heat more evenly, helping the young to hatch synchronously.

Those big eggs have a benefit. As among similar large-egged birds, ducklings hatch strong, downy-feathered, and ready to go! Typically, the morning after hatching they follow their mother out into the world—whether that means scarcely a toddle into the water or a multistory tumble and trek through the woods.

On water, they swim buoyantly and feed themselves completely. For protection, warmth, and sometimes a free ride, they stick near their mother.

Or sometimes someone else’s mother. Some species amalgamate, or merge, their broods, either sharing mothering duties or adopting the young out to a single caregiver, which may free the departing parent to undertake a second nesting. Either way, the attending mother remains home base. She guards the ducklings against predators from cats to crows and bass to bullfrogs. Initial evidence is that older hens grow more successful at keeping their young alive. After about two months, the young can fly. A late brood may remain with their mother into the fall.

Meanwhile, the brightly colored males, willingly or not, have been drawing attention from bird-watchers and predators alike. In contrast, the brown hues of the female may have kept her, and therefore their young, alive.

Which brings us back around to architecture: in human concepts, form may follow function. In nature’s architecture, function, such as child-rearing, and form, such as camouflage, seem to co-evolve in an intricate dance of chance and discovery, all choreographed under the hand of habitat.

Photos by Larry Jordan: top, Wood Duck with ducklings; center, Cinnamon Teal; left, Barrow’s Goldeneye

## Native Plants, Native Birds, Happy Warriors

By Jim Clark, RRAS Conservation Committee Co-Chair

On August 10 I took a walk around Butcher Slough at the Arcata Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary (AWMS). My first stop was the pond where I saw, among other species, a Virginia Rail and two Sora. On the observation deck was a sign asking people not to pick the aquatic plant because it is the highly invasive Sponge plant (*Limnobiium laevigatum*). Arcata is one of two locations in California where this plant was recently first found. It now threatens the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

I turned back to continue north on the trail along Butcher Slough. The trail that once had views of the restored slough on one side and the swamp of the old log pond on the other was now just a path through nearly solid walls of Himalaya blackberry (*Rubus armeniacus*), which block the views to the extent that the self-guiding interpretive feature of the trail is essentially useless. Arcata’s failure to control invasive non-native plants detracts from the human user experience and negatively influences native biodiversity in ways we don’t fully understand. It’s a symptom of administrative priorities everywhere that need to be addressed. This is a constant battle with people we generally like, who have their own

administrative challenges. It’s a chore we must not give up on.

Just like wildlife in the AWMS, most of us live in an altered landscape that includes invasive non-native plants, infrastructure, and other disturbed land. While we can’t return the urbanized areas of our towns to pre-colonial conditions, we can replace the worst invasive plants with native vegetation and watch the birds return. Our yard in Eureka is predominantly native trees, shrubs, ground cover, and grass. Over the years the number and species of birds has increased. What’s more, it’s fun and rewarding, and has contributed to the “renaturalization” of the neighborhood.

The take-away here is that conservation is much more than just opposing bad environmental policy; it’s also about doing a lot of little things that provide happiness on several levels to compensate for the drudgery of fighting against environmentally destructive policies and projects. By paying attention to and balancing environmental activism activities we can maintain optimism and a better perspective for being happy conservation warriors.

*Note:* “renaturalization” is a made-up word to indicate reintroduction of native plants as opposed to “naturalization,” which refers to introduction of non-native plants that become part of the landscape on a long-term basis.

## eBird Protocol Tips: Part I

By Ken Burton

It's no exaggeration to say that eBird has revolutionized birding in the last twenty years. Most North American birders now use it routinely, many on a daily basis. With so much information pouring in (now approaching 100 million checklists containing 2 billion individual observations), eBird also has become an unparalleled research and monitoring tool. As someone who uses local eBird data in analyses and publications, however, I've come to recognize three areas where errors in reporting compromise the quality of the information:

- overreporting distance
- duplicating shared checklists
- choosing the wrong location

Part I gives tips on the first two reporting errors. Look for Part II on how to choose your location in the November *Sandpiper*.

**Overreporting Distance** One of the most common errors in eBird (and Christmas Bird Counts) is including retraced ground in distance calculations. This results in reported bird densities that are misleading to those using the data. The target statistic is how much distance you covered (and how much time you spent doing it), *not* how far you traveled. Thus, the distance for an out-and-back birding trip, for example, should be calculated in one direction only.

There are four valid options when you reach the apogee of an out-and-back trip. The simplest is just to end your eBirding; stop your track, submit your checklist, and you're done. Another option is to keep your track running (and keep birding) on the return trip, then divide your distance in half. A third approach is to stop your track, keep birding, and update the clock when you finish. The fourth, and probably best, is to submit your list and start a whole new one when you turn around; you double the information without having to keep

track of which birds you counted on the outward leg.

Where it gets tricky is with more complex routes that may include disjunct stretches of doubling back. Maybe someday the eBird app will allow us to pause and resume our track logs, but we're not there yet. One solution is to use a different app (such as Gaia GPS) to record the distance when retracing your steps and then subtract that total from the overall total at the end. Keep in mind that running two GPS apps at the same time really eats up battery power.

**Duplicating Shared Checklists** As a field trip leader, I often keep eBird lists that I share with participants. Sometimes I discover later that some participants both accepted the shared list *and* submitted a private list for the same outing. Not only does that artificially increase the numbers of birds in their own accounts, but from the eBird perspective it inflates the overall numbers of birds being reported. Neither eBird nor the people using the data can recognize that the same observations were reported multiple times.

Whenever you're birding in a group and someone else is keeping the group list, help ensure that it's comprehensive, and don't submit your own. Remember, you can always modify your version of the list to exclude birds you missed. If you simply must have your own list, hide it from public output so that only you can see it.



As the eBird website's Science page puts it, "eBird transforms the global birding community's passion for birds into a powerful resource for research, conservation, and education."

It's up to all of us in the eBird community to make the quality of eBird data the best it can be. All eBird protocols are spelled out on the website, and even if you're an experienced eBirder, it's worth periodically reviewing the eBird Rules and Best Practices page in the Help Center.



### DID YOU KNOW?

From the CatBird Committee

#### Social Media and Beliefs of Cat Colony Caretakers

Research has highlighted six beliefs attributed to CCCs (cat colony caretakers) that seem to be based on CCC advocacy webpages and social media. One belief is that domestic cats fill a natural environmental niche when they kill wildlife. In fact, domestic cats are an invasive species developed by humans. There is no natural niche that domestic cats fill. Scholarly research can provide a realistic understanding of our beloved cats and their place in nature and effects on wildlife. Please keep your kitty safely indoors, in a catio or on a leash. The birds thank you.

Source: Longcore, et al., *Conservation Biology* 2009, and Loyd, et al., *Ecology and Society* 2010

**Garganey Redux** Last October, 2023, a Garganey was spotted at the Arcata Marsh and enjoyed some weeks of fame. This September, beginning on the 15th, eBird's Rare Bird Alert lit up with reports of another Garganey!

Photo courtesy of Jeff Todoroff



### KID'S CORNER WOWZA WILDLIFE!

By Leslie Scopes Anderson



WHO IS THAT HANDSOME DEVIL?!

#### FUN FACTS:

Wood Ducks are a masterpiece of nature with their beautiful colors! They nest in trees around a pond or marsh. The ducklings jump from the nest as much as 50' without harm.

#### WHERE IN THE WORLD?

Wood Ducks can be found in our area at the Sequoia Park pond all year around. Look for ducklings in the spring.