

The Sandpiper

September 2024



Redwood Region Audubon Society

Join us on September 19 at 7:00 p.m. for a presentation on:

What's Song Got to Do with It? The "Mystery" of Humpback Whale Song, Text and photo by Jeff Jacobsen

Song is an integral part of our daily lives: Top 40s radio, guitar and campfire, traditional tunes and spontaneous improvisation, all with rules of rhythm, rhyme, and repetition that vary among cultures, and evolve. Did we learn song from birds, part of our evolutionary landscape, or are we just projecting our definition of song onto them, or both? Is song an honest signal of fitness? Was song a step on the way to language? And how the heck could a big fat wet naked nose-breathing mammal that hasn't heard a bird in millennia contribute to the conversation? Jeff will review what has been learned about humpback whale song since the 1970s, include research at Isla Socorro Mexico (along with an update on bird conservation there), and end with zero conclusions to the above questions whatsoever. Please bring your own observations/definitions/questions about song.

Jeff's career spans decades of work with whales and related projects in conservation and ecology. From 1977, when he went looking for killer whales along the shores of Northern Vancouver Island, BC, to 1987 where, on the remote island of Isla Socorro in the Mexican Pacific, he helped study breeding behavior of a small population of humpback whales. While there, island ecology became a side project, including conservation of one of the most endangered sea birds, the endemic Townsend's Shearwater, threatened by introduced cat predation. He continued seasonal work for years on both of those projects, and meanwhile in 1996 joined an ocean acoustics company conducting surveys across the North Pacific and in the Gulf of Mexico. He is now easing toward the sidelines, still recording song here, still wondering if we'll ever figure it out from our side of the air-water interface.

Programs are held at Six Rivers Masonic Lodge, 251 Bayside Road, Arcata, or go to rras.org for the Zoom link. Drinks and goodies are served at 7:00 p.m., the program begins at 7:30.



RRAS FIELD TRIPS IN SEPTEMBER

Every Saturday, 8:30-11am. Join RRAS at the Arcata Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary for a free guided field trip with an experienced birder. Meet in the parking area at the end of I Street (Klopp Lake). Facilities – one portable. Bring binoculars if you have them. If not, come on out anyway! Trip leaders for September: September 7, Dan Greaney ~ September 14, Cindy Moyer ~ September 21, Chet Ogan ~ September 28, Mark Colwell

More Field Trips

Sunday, September 8, 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). *Possible closure: check fws.gov/refuge/humboldt-bay or call 707-733-5406 for status.

Sunday, September 15, 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).

Saturday, September 28, 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, susanpenn60@gmail.com for more information.

Sunday, September 29, 9-? Join Gary Friedrichsen and two others for an all-day tour of Humboldt County's coastal lagoons. See the article on page 2 for all the details.

Check rras.org for field trips planned after the Sandpiper deadline.



President's Column

By Kathryn Wendel

Migration is finally upon us as summer turns to autumn, and the new season brings us greater species diversity as birds move up and down the Redwood Coast along our section of the Pacific Flyway. This fall, Redwood Region Audubon is participating with California Audubon in celebrating the amazing biodiversity of our state with Biodiversity Day, and you can participate too! If you are an eBirder, it can be as simple as sharing your checklist with "CaliforniaBiodiversityDay," or if

you are more into iNaturalist, see if you can submit over thirty species to that app. Help us represent our local chapter by getting out in nature and sharing your observations! California Biodiversity Day runs from September 7 through 15, and is organized by CA Department of Fish and Wildlife, CA State Parks, and the California Academy of Sciences.

Our ocean birding trip is coming up quickly. RRAS is sponsoring a pelagic trip aboard the *Stellar Sunrise* on October 5. We typically follow the Eel River Canyon off Cape Mendocino about thirty miles west. This is a chance to see far off-shore species such as albatross, jaegers, storm-petrels, and more. Please email me at president@rras.org to sign up, space is limited.

Offshore Wind Farms: A New Way to Measure Impacts on Birds, by Gary Falxa

As we reduce our reliance on fossil fuels, offshore wind farms are being pursued as a source of cleaner electricity. In our area, the Humboldt Wind Energy Area (HWEA) project includes two lease areas located 21 to 35 miles offshore between Humboldt Bay and Trinidad. Although leases have been issued, current permits are to conduct site assessments, including environmental impact studies; wind farm construction will require a future permit process.

One challenge with assessing any wind project is predicting (before construction) and then measuring (after construction) impacts on birds. For example, pelagic seabirds like shearwaters and albatrosses cover huge areas and are patchy, so predicting occurrence in a given wind area may require a long period of pre-project observation. Once wind farms are operating, finding carcasses to estimate bird mortality has been the method used for land-based wind farms. Unfortunately, this approach won't work for ocean-based wind farms!

A recent study explores a new method to document seabird collision risk for offshore turbines (link: [Seabird thermal tracking study](#)). The authors tested an automated technology which combines thermal imaging and stereo vision photography to document flight tracks and related behavior of seabirds in the HWEA. Data are collected continuously and allow estimating the number of seabirds that would occur within swept area of a wind farm's turbine blades. The high-resolution tracks provided insight into seabird space use at the heights that make them vulnerable to collision, and during various environmental conditions,



such as darkness, strong winds, and fog. The technology is also promising for documenting bird collisions with turbines, whether on land or sea.

An additional challenge for the HWEA is that our offshore environment is hard on equipment (think heavy winds and storms combined with corrosive salt air). The study had a generator failure after three months, resulting in a shorter data collection period than planned. The current technology has limitations: of 1,407 birds detected, only 6 could be identified more precisely than as "birds" (5 gulls and a skua). Nonetheless, the method should be able to grossly quantify bird use of the area and bird collisions with turbines. As envisioned, the area swept by turbine blades will extend from 25 meters (82 feet) to 260 meters (853 feet) above the ocean surface. It was encouraging to see that 79 percent of the birds detected were flying below the rotor swept zone and thus not at risk; however, 21 percent in the rotor zone is a lot of birds at risk.

For details and the science behind the study, go to the link provided earlier. To learn more and keep up with the Humboldt offshore wind project, a website run by local environmental organizations is a great resource: www.northcoastoffshorewind.org/.

A Life-Changing Journey

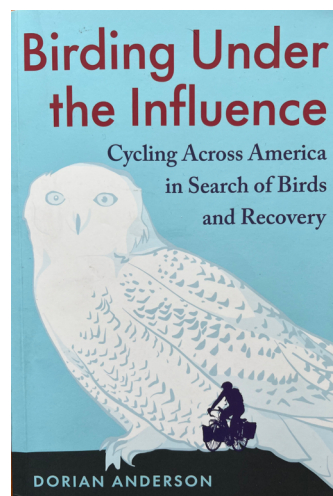
Book review by Gail Kenny

More than a memoir of a bicycle big year, *Birding Under the Influence: Cycling Across America in Search of Birds and Recovery* by Dorian Anderson is about a man finding his way in the world. In 2014, after struggling with substance abuse and disillusioned with the rat race as a postdoc neuroscience researcher, Anderson abandoned his career and put his relationship on hold to spend a year birding across the US on his bicycle. (For those who might not be familiar with the term, a Big Year is when someone attempts to see as many bird species as they can in a year.) During his Big Year, Anderson kept a blog called Biking for Birds to fund-raise for bird habitat conservation and share his experience. The blog was instrumental in helping him write this engaging memoir and publish it almost ten years later.

Before his Big Year, Anderson had little experience long-distance bike riding, but he was an experienced birder, having taken to birding as a child and building his skills through his mid-teens. By the time he did the Big Year, he was well into his thirties, with an on-again off-again relationship, a history of drug and alcohol abuse, and serious doubts about his career.

This memoir includes many stories of Anderson's experiences with interesting characters met along the way and his strategy for choosing his route. It is a love story as well as a birding story, and there are also reflections on his past experiences with work and play. Throughout the book, he weaves tales of his adventures in the Big Year, his life as a workaholic and addict, his romantic relationship struggles, and most importantly his passion for birding.

In the end, Anderson biked 17,830 miles, saw 618 bird species, and raised \$49,000 for bird conservation. He married the woman in the relationship he writes about in the book and currently works as a birding tour guide for Tropical Birding Tours.



Kid's Corner
WOWZA WILDLIFE!
By Leslie Scopes Anderson

WHERE IN THE WORLD?
Long-billed Curlews can be seen in our area on mudflats and tidal shores, as well as flooded fields. They breed inland in a shallow nest on the ground.

FUN FACTS
Long-billed Curlews are No. America's largest shorebird. With their amazingly long bill, they probe in the mud for deep-burrowing worms, shrimp, and crabs. A group is called a "curfew" of curlews.

Butcher Slough Cleanup: Future Boon for the Birds! *By Gina Rogers*

The toxic legacy of the timber industry in Humboldt County is a familiar story, so it is always good to hear about new funding for cleanup at contaminated sites. And there is good news. The City of Arcata recently received \$400,000 from the EPA's Brownfields Program to develop a cleanup plan for Butcher Slough (the area adjacent to the Arcata Marsh visitor center, also known as the Log Pond). The slough meanders through the Arcata Marsh & Wildlife Sanctuary and into Humboldt Bay, with its reach up the tidally influenced stretch of Jolly Giant Creek. It forms an integral part of the wetlands that make the Arcata Marsh such a vibrant birding hot spot, offering habitat where shorebirds, ducks, herons, and egrets forage.

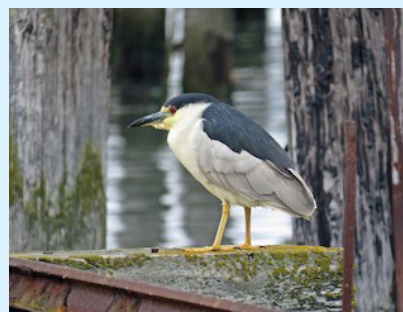
Historically, however, from the mid-1940s through 1976, the site was used primarily for timber-related operations. These activities left behind dioxins, metals, and other contaminants. Sediment sampling by Humboldt Waterkeeper in conjunction with the City of Arcata in 2018 and again in 2022 found high concentrations of dioxins in the slough, leading to recommendations for cleaning up the site. The new funding will enable the city to develop an actionable cleanup plan, including community engagement around cleanup options. A history of the site's contamination and plans for the future can be found on humboldtwaterkeeper.org.



Did You Know?

From the Catbird Committee

According to Christopher Lepczyk, a wildlife biologist at Auburn University in Alabama, the list of creatures cats have chomped down on includes 347 species of conservation concern. Among them are the Northern Bobwhite, the only quail native to the eastern US, and the Little Brown Bat.



King of the Night *By Susan Penn*

Scientists have named the Black-crowned Night-Heron, *Nycticorax nycticorax*. This translates roughly as “night raven night raven.” But while the strident call of this bird at night might remind you of a raven, this debonair bird is not even closely related to ravens. In the Humboldt Bay area, their relatives include the Great Blue Heron, all our egrets, and also the reclusive bittern. They share the fact that the night-heron never learned to sing, and the love of fresh fish and frogs. They also share a coiled neck which is kept discreetly hidden.

A fine artist crafted these creatures. The top of the adult's head and back are a glossy black, while the neck and forehead are a brilliant white, setting off a long, heavy black bill, and deep scarlet eyes. At the nape of the neck are two or three long, thin white plumes. On a breezy day, these plumes float up over a black back, then settle back down in a graceful arc. The wings are medium blue-gray, with a lighter gray belly like the color of fog seen through branches.

Night-herons roost in trees near the water during the day. Walking by, you will often hear an off-key, hollow clucking, which aids in locating them. It seems odd that a two-foot-tall bird would be hard to discern, but their coloring mimics the dark and light of tree and sky, and looking up into a tree, part of the bird is usually obscured. Peer up through cypress branches to find a night-heron, and you may spy just toes and part of a belly, maybe a gray shoulder topped with a black and white cap, or a sharp red eye gazing down at you.

Juveniles are basically brown, with streaky brown and white necks, and either spotted or striped backs, depending on their age. And their eyes are yellow! Their body shape and stout bill, which is much lighter colored than adults', are keys to identifying them. They are curious youngsters, and two or three of them can sometimes be found together, exploring around docks and rocks in shallow water. They are not initially afraid of people, and I once watched in dismay as a juvenile picked up a cigarette butt left on a walkway just a few feet away from me. Fortunately, he decided that it was not food!

Night-herons walk rapidly along on short yellow legs with long, serious-looking unwebbed toes. Unlike their cousins, they disdain muddy feet. The herons are all considered “wading birds,” and everybody else wades through marshes, tidal sloughs, and cow pastures. The night-heron however, prefers to balance on rocks, perch on docks, or swing on dock lines – anything that gets them within stabbing distance of the water without sullyng their yellow legs! They spare themselves a lot of grief by feeding at night while their larger cousins are sleeping, as competition for food can be intense. I have seen them get pushed aside by Great Egrets before sunset, but once darkness falls, the Black-Crowned Night-Herons reign.



Photos courtesy of Ken Burton

Your membership in Redwood Region Audubon supports our field trips, programs, education, and conservation efforts. You may also join us online at www.rras.org and click the JOIN US button. We have two different types of memberships:

Local membership For just \$15 a year you will receive *EcoNews*, with the *Sandpiper* inserted. To join locally mail a check for \$15 made out to RRAS with your name, address, and email address to: Redwood Region Audubon Society
PO Box 1054, Eureka, CA 95502

National membership Join National Audubon and receive *EcoNews* with the *Sandpiper* along with *Audubon* magazine. Please use our Chapter Code C24 so that we receive our share of your membership.

National Membership Application:
My check for \$20 is enclosed. (Introductory Offer)

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