

PRBO Conservation Science Birdathon 2005

September 22, 1:22 pm through September 23, 1:22 pm

Team: David Wimpfheimer and Susan Colletta

California County: Yuba

Key: Species in **bold** are actual birds seen or heard with 100% identification
Species mentioned (not in bold), have not been counted toward the total species

Dear Friends,

We were proud of our effort and the outcome of last year's Birdathon. Not only did we raise over \$1600.00 for PRBO, but also won the Parmeter Prize that is given annually to the team that records the highest percentage of a county's total list of species ever seen in that county. As we debated where to do our birdathon this year we considered the options and realized that returning to Yuba County made the most sense. Was our total last year a fluke or could we do even better? Also, we had done a great deal of research and strategizing last year, as well as two days of scouting. We could utilize that information this year, readily. Only 256 species have been seen in the county, making it one of California's poorest for overall bird diversity. Its location away from the coast, small size and small area of wetlands account for this paucity. What a challenge!

We planned to repeat the birdathon almost exactly as we did last year. And we had the added advantage of knowing which species were relatively common and which were uncommon that would require a greater effort. By scheduling the count two weeks earlier than last year we hoped that we would see more insect eating birds such as warblers and flycatchers.

On September 22 we left Point Reyes with our SUV decked out with birding and camping equipment and a variety of food and snacks strategically located within the car. The spotting scope tripod was at the perfect height and binoculars were at the ready. Every second counts, so being organized is important. At 10:30 am we were at the aromatic Marysville Sewage Ponds gaining permission for our return the next day. We had roughly an hour to scout some of the areas we hoped would provide us with water birds the following day. There were many at the sewage ponds, but the rice fields north of town were dry. A local birder informed David that the rice fields had not been harvested yet. Once the rice is harvested, the fields are burned, then flooded to prepare them for next years crop. The area then can harbor thousands of ibis, sandpipers, ducks and other water birds. Not one field had been flooded yet, and the only ibis we spotted was during our scout. The bird was seen flying around, looking a bit lost, finally landing far out in a field on a tiny patch of green surrounded by a flock of crows. This lone ibis must have been desperate to land among such company. We assumed there must have been a puddle.

We drove up from the grasslands and orchards of the Central Valley to the mixed conifer habitat at 4,000 feet above sea level. In an area that had been productive for us last year we started birding. There were many **Red-breasted Nuthatches**, a few **Mountain Chickadees** and a **Brown Creeper** crawling along the trunk of a huge Sugar Pine. It was 1:22 pm, a good time to start.

Against the rich greens of pine, fir and cedar boughs, the sun shone brilliantly through the brighter colors of maple and dogwood. Many **Steller's Jays** flew through the forest and **Dark-eyed Juncos** flitted through the lower branches. **Yellow-rumped Warblers** were numerous and David was glad to hear a **Black-throated Gray Warbler** and then we both viewed this handsome bird. An **Orange-crowned Warbler** showed itself. We were on a roll, although a bit disappointed that several of the high elevation species that we had recorded last year were being quiet and elusive.

Slate Creek is a beautiful mountain stream, its waters were gin clear, but not a single Dipper was about. Plenty of Dipper evidence dashed all over the rocks, but no dipper. **Hairy Woodpeckers** and **Northern Flickers** called and we were quite happy to see a **Hutton's Vireo**, a species we missed last year. We heard a **Pacific-slope Flycatcher**, a species that sings everyday in the spring and summer near our house. A **Hermit Thrush** perched on a low branch long enough for a positive ID as we looked up and saw several **Pine Siskins**.

We were using walkie-talkies to cover as much territory as possible. We could look at different areas if need be, but still be in close proximity to hear a bird that one of us might be seeing or hearing, or alert each other of a fly over. As a team, we must see or hear each bird species. Susan considers this type of togetherness and teamwork – romantic.

We were nearing the end of our allotted time in this habitat. Finally we heard the distinctive high call of a **Chestnut-backed Chickadee**. **Ruby-crowned Kinglets** were much easier to find, but it took a while before Susan turned the tapping sound we heard into a good sighting of a **White-headed Woodpecker**.

Just before we started descending down out of the mountains on La Porte Road, Susan picked out the rocketing form of a **Band-tailed Pigeon**, a species we knew would not occur at a lower elevation. We were glad to hear a **Golden-crowned Kinglet** and then saw a **Common Raven** before descending down almost two thousand feet to a different life zone of blue oak and gray pine. A quick stop at a riparian patch produced a **Song Sparrow**.

We had been going for two and half hours. We tried several times to make soaring **Turkey Vultures** into eagles, but could not. Several **Red-tailed Hawks** caught our attention. In drier chaparral habitat, a **Wrentit** sang in response to David's whistled imitation while a **Bewick's Wren** scolded nearby. The oak woodland gave us **Oak Titmouse, Lesser Goldfinch, House Finch, Acorn Woodpecker, Mourning Dove, Western Scrub Jay** and **Spotted Towhee**.

Western Bluebirds perched on a phone wire as we headed to Collins Reservoir. It was about 5:15 pm and we had a little over two hours of daylight remaining, but this lake was an important stop for us. Several birds were recorded here last year that were not seen at any other location.

Before we even got out of the car we heard a **White-breasted Nuthatch** and a **Nuttall's Woodpecker** while a flock of **Bushtits** careened through the branches and a **California Towhee** flew in front of us. Susan scoured the reservoir by spotting scope and found **Common Merganser, Canada Goose, Mallard, Killdeer, Belted Kingfisher, Eared , Pied-billed, Clark's** and **Western Grebes**. A male **American Kestrel** perched on a boulder, gleaming in the late afternoon glow. And a **Forster's Tern** was a great find as they are quite uncommon away from the coast. David "attacked" the bushes; among the more common **White-crowned Sparrows**, he found two **Rufous-crowned Sparrows**. As Susan scoped, she listened to the responses David was getting and then he ran over and she pointed him to where the birds were swimming in the reservoir. There was no sign of an Osprey, but a group of **Wild Turkeys** scampered across the road in front of us. A **Black Phoebe, European Starlings** and **Brewer's Blackbird** were easy to see, as were some **California Quail** perched on a fence as we left the area.

Susan pointed out a whitish bird flying overhead, no it wasn't a gull, it was a **White-tailed Kite**. A few miles away, her incredibly keen eyes picked out another raptor. She had great views of it as it few closer and careened around above the car. David was able to pull over on Loma Rica Road and fortunately saw a small dark falcon plummeting behind some pines. It was an early and unexpected **Merlin**. More expected, but certainly wonderful was a family of **Phainopepla**. Two adults and three juveniles, making odd noises while flying around the top of a mistletoe-laden oak. If we were "just" birding, we would have watched this incredible spectacle longer. An **Anna's Hummingbird** zoomed by.

We were almost out of the foothills; a **Yellow-billed Magpie** and a flock of **American Crows** flew by. We stopped near a small pond. There were no water birds here, but a few **Lark Sparrows** flew up and then Susan picked out a **Red-breasted Sapsucker** pecking along the main trunk. We stopped at a tiny, private pond and saw nothing. Momentarily disappointed, our sullen faces lit up when we both heard the distinctive hoarse call of a **Ring-necked Pheasant**. Astonished, at our timing, we searched around for the only other thing that may distinguish itself from this sound. We saw no evidence of anyone hanging out the day's laundry on a rusty old clothesline. Great!

Last year we found several managed ponds that gave us many water birds that we did not find anywhere else. Susan had contacted the owners of the private property beforehand to kindly ask permission to gain access to their bird wonderland. Mr. H. remembered us from the previous year and told us we could have full access to his expansive private refuge. Her spirits perked up when he told her that he had many ducks due to his full ponds. Then he said "so many, I'm going to get rid of some of them." Susan wasn't sure if he was talking in jest, but she pleaded with him to not do anything until Saturday. We made a quick scouting look on our way up to the high country, and indeed, his ponds hosted many, many waterfowl. Hundreds. We could not wait to get back on the clock and count. Since we were in a rush, we declined the H's invitation to coffee, but managed to have all five guard-dogs happy with us.

Now at sunset we stopped at the H's ponds. As expected, the mosquitoes were ferocious, but the birds were abundant and we sacrificed ourselves to raise more money for PRBO. **Marsh Wrens** chattered, a **Virginia Rail** gruffly chuckled and a **Common Yellowthroat** check-checked. As we swatted away the mosquitoes we peered through our binoculars to see **American Wigeon, Common Moorhen, Wood Duck, Northern Pintail, Great Egret, Gadwall, Cinnamon Teal, Northern Shoveler , and Ring-necked Duck**. Susan spotted something

odd in the pasture. It took us about 5 minutes to recognize two **American Bitterns**, hidden in the tall grass, snapping up, lightning fast to grab flying insects. Something we had not seen before. **Black-crowned Night Herons** watched us with curiosity. We heard a **Long-billed Dowitcher** kek-kek-kekking. As we turned onto the main road Susan picked out two **Great Horned Owls** perched in bare trees. The glowing pinkish sunset cloud scattered skies and Sutter Buttes provided a dramatic ending to a busy day.

Being superstitious, we ate at the same burger joint as last year, and ate the same lousy burgers. We reviewed our list of species. Our total stood at 74. Better than last year, but included in that figure were several water birds that were not seen on the first day in 2004. Knowing that we would have to see an additional fifty species, David was not optimistic that we could beat our total of 121 from last year. Susan had higher hopes. The most important thing is we were out, having a wonderful time, cementing couple companionship and doing a birdathon.

We headed for a campsite and drove through the oak savannah east of Beale Air Force Base. David whistled for screech owls, but none called back. After a few more stops we were delighted to hear a cacophony of raspy calls. By that time, Susan was too exhausted to venture out of the car, so she rolled down the window and sat on the door. We experienced one of those once in a lifetime moments. The incredibly bright football shaped moon was rising while we witnessed three **Barn Owls** flying in and out of the trees. The still cool air was quiet, except for the screeching of the Barn Owls and hooting of some Great Horned Owls; then blasting out through the airwaves, a bugle, playing the eloquent and haunting sound of TAPS. We were momentarily saddened, since the twenty-four notes are usually heard at funerals and memorial services. Apparently, it was lights out at the AFB. We could have quit counting, but we were enjoying ourselves too much. The shadowy figures of Barn Owls, Great Horned Owls and a possible Western Screech Owl zooming at Susan's head, had us merrily jaunting along.

Since it was just one week before hunting season began, we knew our sleep would not be interrupted by hunters pulling up beside us, putting their rifles together, scaring us into sleepless nervousness. A good nights sleep was in order. However, we kept the windows open to hear nocturnal species. David got up at 5:30 am and heard a **Western Screech Owl** calling from a group of oaks. Susan lounged lazily in her warm sleeping bag, but kept her ears perked up to hear what David was hearing. An hour later we gave up on hearing a Poorwill and started to make coffee. We were surprised to hear a **Rock Wren**. While there are some scattered large boulders here, we had expected this species near one of the reservoir shores.

When Susan woke up, she could only open one eye. One of the eight mosquito bites she received on her face the night before had swollen to the size of a cuckoo's egg. Essentially closing her left eye. Along with her limp from her sprained ankle, we jokingly wondered if we could get a golf-type handicap for the birdathon.

We began birding in the large riparian habitat of Waldo Creek at Spenceville Wildlife Area. Not long after the sun rose we added two species; **Swainson's Thrush** and **Wilson's Warbler**. All of these birds breed nearby, but it was just as likely that these individuals were migrants just passing through. We were happy to get them regardless, especially as we missed them last year. David despaired when the strong breeze turned into wind speeds averaging 18 mph, with wind gusts to 31 mpg. Optimistic Susan said it might be fun for raptors to glide around and the land birds might be hunkered down, therefore easier to spot. This non-scientific rationale turned out to have some merit.

Mist rose from a wet swale and a **Lincoln's Sparrow** perched on a branch. **American Goldfinches** chipped-chipped about. Several **Lewis' Woodpeckers** sat on the tops of oak trees, their rosy breasts shown like beacons. One had an aerial dogfight with an American Kestrel. A nearby marsh didn't give us any rails, but plenty of **Red-winged Blackbirds**. A **Cooper's Hawk** flew across the road in front of us. By this time it was 8:15 am and we heard another bugle out through the airwaves. Revelry! We joked that the soldiers slept in later than we did.

The Camp Far West Reservoir was as bare as last year, although Susan appreciated the heated ladies room. There was no sign of the Bald Eagle that had supposedly nested upstream. We stopped on the dam overlooking Bear River, and had a fascinating view of at least 20 Great Egrets, Common Mergansers and our first **Great Blue Heron**.

We drove through the grasslands after leaving the reservoir. Susan yelled out that she was seeing a large raptor with a white tail. It wasn't the eagle, but we were quite pleased to see a **Ferruginous Hawk**. As David scanned the sky to pick out the "Ferrugy" he saw a swarm of **Tree Swallows**. Mixed in amongst them were several **Vaux's Swifts**. David stopped to point out a **Western Meadowlark**. Behind it we saw another whitish raptor, an adult male **Northern Harrier**. There were now gale force winds. David cursed our luck, but perhaps it accomplished just the opposite as birds stayed on the ground out of the winds.

We were now driving more quickly on the road between the air force base and Highway 70. There was very little shoulder and a fair amount of commute traffic, certainly not an ideal birding road. Ideal or not Susan spotted a dark raptor sitting on a fence post off to the right. David quickly said "Red-tail" while barely looking at it. However Susan insisted on backing up to take a better look. It was a stunning dark morph **Swainson's Hawk!**

Jasper Lane crossed over a tree shrouded creek, good habitat for a **House Wren**, which we saw. At the next stream crossing David tried to pry out some sparrows while Susan looked over the open country birds. She called David over to look at a bird with a bright yellow belly that sat upright on a low fence, bracing against the strong wind. David was startled to identify an immature **Western Kingbird**. Although they breed in habitat like this we thought that the breeding birds would have left this area a long time ago.

Several **Savannah Sparrows** perched on barbed wires and a **Northern Mockingbird** jumped out of a bramble thicket into another. Another raptor flew low, out of the wind, a **Red-shouldered Hawk**. We were thinking that the earlier date was giving us some good birds that we hadn't seen last year. As if to confirm that, we saw five **Barn Swallows** sitting side-by-side on a telephone wire. A medium sized sandpiper with a huge bill flushed out of the wet fields off to our right and flew in front of us, a **Wilson's Snipe**.

We turned north on Earle Lane where three **Snowy Egrets** poked around a marshy creek. Of more interest were several very large groups of blackbirds feeding in the fields. We got out to scrutinize them and were rewarded with a **Brown-headed Cowbird**. Even more gratifying, were the sightings of a **Yellow-headed Blackbird** and several **Tricolored Blackbirds**.

Down a road with grasslands and wooden corrals we saw a **Loggerhead Shrike** in the exact location as last year. We hoped to see ibis where we had seen them in wet fields last year. However, we were disappointed not only to find dry fields and no birds, but even worse, numerous bulldozers that were clearing the land for another housing development that was about to sprawl across the area.

We were very happy with our progress, although there were only about three hours left. We drove quickly to the brushy habitat of the Linda Sewage Ponds. They were dry last year and had failed to produce many passerines. This year we were much luckier. The winds had abated and we scored: **Downy Woodpecker, Willow Flycatcher, Fox Sparrow** and **Golden-crowned Sparrow**.

The Marysville sewage ponds was a make or break site for us. It had become even more important with all the rice fields dry and birdless. We did find birds that we expected; **Green Heron, Least** and **Spotted Sandpiper, Greater Yellowlegs, Black-necked Stilt, and Double-crested Cormorant**. However, we really hit the jackpot with several birds we didn't count on: **Lesser Yellowlegs, Lesser Scaup, American White Pelican** and amazingly a **Common Goldeneye** lounging in the sun.

The trees around the sewage ponds are a rich riparian zone adjacent to the confluence of the Yuba and Feather Rivers. There were many passerines in the oaks and other trees here; **Yellow** and **Nashville Warbler** were the highlights. There was even a small *Buteo* that we felt quite likely to be a Broad-winged Hawk. Even though we had it in the spotting scope for 10 minutes, we only saw its back and the side of its head. When it flew, it headed away from us and disappeared into the trees. We debated over this Yuba County rarity and decided that 95% probability is not something we were willing to count. Several of the swallows flying overhead were **Violet-greens**. Less exciting, but still adding to our list were a group of **Rock Pigeons** on the banks of a pond.

It was time to leave Marysville and head to the rice fields north of town. We drove through an area of large trees near the county offices. A number of **Cedar Waxwings** swirled through the branches. We did pause to note a few **House Sparrows** on the lawn. Just as we were about to leave, happy with those birds, we heard the distinctive double call note of a **Western Tanager**.

There was not a single wet rice field. Last year we had seen thousands of White-faced Ibis. This year there was not a single one about. We rushed to Mr. H's ponds hoping there would be an ibis there. Despite careful searching we did not see one. We did see **Green-winged Teal, Redhead** and finally an **American Coot**.

In our remaining thirty minutes we searched the area for a Golden Eagle, Ruddy Duck or Say's Phoebe, all species we had seen last year. We did not get them. Ironically the coot was our last bird of the day. It is a very common bird in most places, but seemingly quite uncommon in Yuba County. That's what we discovered with many species. Learning the occurrence of birds in an unfamiliar part of California added to this fun challenge.

At the end of our 24-hour clock, to the second, we relaxed. We knew we had done well, but not as exceptional as the final total. We went over the species list three times and then Susan counted. A few disbelieving and happy expletives later, David heard "**133 species!**" Eleven more than last year! That is **52%** of all the bird species ever seen in Yuba County. Wow!

We had a lot of fun exploring and challenging ourselves to find all the birds in an area we were hardly familiar with.

More importantly, our efforts helped secure your continued support for PRBO Conservation Science. We send you our heartfelt gratitude for your generosity this year. As our initial letter indicated, it was extremely difficult to ask you to sponsor us. Hurricane Katrina and subsequent mayhem was an overwhelming tragedy of human suffering. We have been heart warmed to receive your replies. It seems we are all linked by the same generosity of spirit and the same appreciation of human values and honesty.

Thank you to each and every one of you.

David Wimpfheimer and Susan Colletta