

Point Reyes Bird Observatory Birdathon
Yuba County
October 6 to 7, 2004

Dear Friends,

Susan and I were originally going to do the birdathon in September, but as we explored the various habitats in Yuba County, we realized that there were very few migrant or wintering landbirds in the area. We cancelled our trip and went home. The next day we did a "sleep-in-sitting" birdathon from the deck of our house. Our home is magically placed in Inverness, approximately 200 feet above sea level overlooking the south end of Tomales Bay, with a view of grasslands and salt marshes. The Point Reyes National Seashore purchased this land and is currently working out various options to restore the current Giacomini cow pastures to tidal wetlands. Our home is surrounded by oak, bay and fir trees and we had a perfectly warm and sunny day to count birds. It was great fun and to our amazement, we saw or heard 92 species of birds. A fabulous day spent in our home environment.

Two weeks later, we returned to Yuba County, hoping for a better outcome than our scouting trip. We knew that this region had fewer birds than in our rich coastal county. However, we hoped that even a modest total here would help us compete against other teams in the "county competition."

We drove up from the grasslands and orchards of the Central Valley to the mixed conifer habitat at 4,000 feet above sea level. We had a moderately good idea where we would need to stop later to find specific birds. Against the rich greens of pine, fir and cedar boughs, the sun shone brilliantly through the brighter colors of maple and dogwood. Even though it was 1:45 on a warm afternoon, a mixed group of Chestnut-baked Chickadees, Red-breasted Nuthatches, Yellow-rumped Warblers, and Steller's Jays moved through the branches. We started our 24-hour clock. As soon as the flock moved off, we drove down the road a mile to a slope of taller trees. We were ecstatic to hear Winter Wren, Brown Creeper, Pileated and White-headed Woodpecker calling. A Cooper's Hawk landed on a branch looking around expectantly. At Slate Creek, we were disappointed not to see an American Dipper, but as we were driving off, we heard its distinctive ringing call. Up the road, in an open forest, Susan picked out a blur that settled in the thick branches of a Ponderosa Pine. It was a Band-tailed Pigeon, which we knew would not occur at a lower elevation. In addition, there were Turkey Vulture, Hairy Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Mountain Chickadee, Common Raven and Golden-crowned Kinglet.

We were pleased with our progress as we returned to La Porte Road. Fortunately, we heard a Pygmy Nuthatch before we dropped down to the town of Brownsville. We had been going for about two hours. In drier chaparral habitat, a Wrentit and Bushtits moved through the branches of manzanita. Nearby oaks gave us Oak Titmouse, Lesser Goldfinch, House Finch, Acorn Woodpecker, Mourning Dove, Western Scrub Jay, Spotted Towhee, Dark-eyed Junco, House and Chipping Sparrow. The latter was a nice surprise.

Down Loma Rica Road, there were Cedar Waxwings in the oaks and we finally heard a Phainopepla. It was 5:30 when we drove up to a reservoir called Collins Lake. I quickly looked at a group of sparrows in some bushes; Rufous-crowned, Lark, White-crowned and Golden-crowned. California Towhees twittered nearby and California Quail hustled along the road. Susan scoured the reservoir and found Common Merganser, Double-crested Cormorant, Canada Goose, Mallard, Great Blue Heron, Killdeer, Coot, Black Phoebe, Brewer's Blackbird, Pied-billed, Clark's and Western Grebe. A Forster's Tern was a great find as they are quite uncommon away from the coast. On a rock below us, a Rock Wren did a little jig. There was no sign of the Osprey that we had seen here two weeks before, but a group of Wild Turkeys scampered across the road in front of us.

Bright shafts of sunlight made it difficult to see the road at sunset. Susan, pointed out a large bird flying in front of the car from right to left and we both yelled out in unison, "Golden Eagle." At a small creek, American Robins flew overhead and a Red-shouldered Hawk sat on a distant post.

I knew there were some ponds in the area from our scouting. None of the ones we had looked at so far yielded the waterbirds we were hoping to see. After sunset, we did find a large pond that looked like it would be productive. It was too dark to see much, but we did hear a Virginia Rail calling. I knew we would have to come back to that pond the next day. At the Burger Hut in Yuba City, we went over our list of species and came up with a total 69. Not bad, but I figured we would have to see at least 50 more

species the next day to be respectful. We estimated that 30 were "easy" ones and the rest would be more difficult.

We headed for a campsite and drove across the grasslands north of Beale AFB. A Barn Owl flew across the road! At several locations in the foothills, I whistled for a Western Screech Owl, but they were quiet. We went to sleep. Some hunters startled us at 4:00 in the morning. I did not get back to sleep so an hour later I took a walk in the moonlight and whistled some more, but still did not hear any owls. Finally, in the blue light before dawn one called just a bit. Two Great Horned Owls also started calling. Just before the dawn chorus, Susan heard a Poorwill. I heard a Hermit Thrush and we were rolling.

The sun's light at dawn illuminated the mist over the marsh and grasslands near Waldo Bridge and we added Marsh Wren, Song Sparrow and Red-winged Blackbird. A Say's Phoebe landed on a lichen-covered rock. Down the road in a grassy swale there were sparrows including a Lincoln's and a Bewick's Wren and an American Goldfinch. In the oak savannah were Anna's Hummingbird, White-breasted Nuthatch, Western Meadowlark, Western Bluebird, Lewis' and Nuttall's Woodpecker. The Camp Far West Reservoir was boringly bare. The only interesting thing was a marker showing that the Donner Party and other emigrants had entered the Central Valley here after descending from the Sierra. At least we found a Spotted Sandpiper along the shore.

Jasper Lane crossed over a tree shrouded creek where we hit the jackpot; Green Heron, Wood Duck, House Wren, Yellow Warbler and Fox Sparrow. In addition, Susan found a Red-breasted Sapsucker and Sharp-shinned Hawk in the adjacent orchard. It was 9:00 and we had to hurry through the wet ranchlands; Great Egret, Red-tailed Hawk, White-tailed Kite, Northern Harrier, American Kestrel, Yellow-billed Magpie, American Crow, European Starling and Savannah Sparrow. "Yes, that was a Loggerhead Shrike on the wire!" The Linda Sewage ponds were bone dry, but White-throated Swifts and Tree Swallows flew overhead. There were many bushes nearby with Mockingbird and Orange-crowned Warbler. We rushed up into the grasslands near the Air Force Base where we had hopes for Prairie Falcon and Ferruginous Hawk. We saw neither and in the process wasted an hour.

At 11:30 we were getting down to the wire and regained some momentum at the Marysville sewage ponds; Eared Grebe, Ruddy Duck, Least Sandpiper, Greater Yellowlegs, Ring-billed Gull, Belted Kingfisher and Rock Pigeon. In the adjacent oaks were many Yellow-rumped Warblers and I was thrilled to find a Black-throated Gray Warbler amongst them. Marysville is very much a blue-collar town, but at the northern end is a neighborhood with new, large houses and landscaped backyards. We were rewarded as a Pine Siskin called from one of the conifers. At a creek crossing, I managed to coax a Common Yellowthroat out of the dense brush.

In the flooded rice fields were some of the same birds we had scouted previously; White-faced Ibis (thousands!), Snowy Egret, Long-billed Dowitcher, Common Snipe, Northern Shoveler and Brown-headed Cowbird. The Black-necked Stilt was a wonderful bonus and as we drove down a road, we both saw a large, white bird off to the side. We had to do a U-turn to see it better and I was startled to see a Tundra Swan, an early migrant. We now made a beeline for the marshy pond we had seen the day before at sunset. The landowner generously let us in to see the birds at the pond he created and maintains with several wildlife agencies. We were extremely grateful. In our last 20 minutes we added; Cinnamon Teal, Gadwall, American Wigeon, Ring-necked Duck, Black-crowned Night Heron and Common Moorhen. Then with only a few minutes, left on our 24-hour clock a medium sized brown bird with chartreuse green legs flew by and settled at the edge of the marsh. It was an American Bittern, our last bird.

Our total was a very respectful 122 species. That figure represents almost half the total number of birds that have ever been seen in Yuba County! We had a lot of fun exploring new places and challenging ourselves to find all the birds in an area we did not know. More importantly, our efforts helped secure your continued support for the Pont Reyes Bird Observatory. We genuinely appreciate your contribution.

Thank you,

David Wimpfheimer and Susan Colletta