

The Whistling Swan



NEWSLETTER OF THE MENDOCINO COAST AUDUBON SOCIETY

April 2010

Wildlife of Trinidad and Tobago

April 19th, 7:00 p.m.

Gualala Arts Center Auditorium

Speaker: Edward Rooks



Mendocino Coast Audubon's annual Gualala meeting will be in the Gualala Arts Center Auditorium at 46501 Gualala Rd, just off Old Stage Road, at 7:00 p.m. This year attendees can experience the fascinating tropical wildlife of Trinidad and Tobago through the photographs and insight of South Bay artist and naturalist Edward Rooks, with additional images by Sea Ranch resident Dean Schuler.



Edward, who is a native of Trinidad and Tobago, leads tours to these stunning islands. His presentation will include images of the Asa Wright Nature Center, a visit to a colony of cave-dwelling nocturnal oilbirds, views of hummingbirds and honeycreepers sipping nectar from flowers, manikins doing their famous "moonwalk" dance, and some beautiful seabird colonies. These islands contain habitat for 97 species of native mammals, 400 birds, 55 reptiles, 25 amphibians, and 617 butterflies, as well as over 2,200 species of flowering plants. Rook's finale will take you on a simulated boat ride in Caroni Swamp at dusk.



This program is open to the public at no charge, but donations to offset the cost of presenting programs are gratefully accepted. For further information, call **937-4463**.

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White-necked Jacobin, Bearded Manikin, Red-legged Honeycreeper.	
Photos courtesy of Dean Schuler	

PRESIDENT'S CORNER**David Jensen**

I was walking out to fetch the morning paper last weekend, when the song of an Orange-crowned Warbler stopped me dead in my tracks. It had been at least six months since I had heard that familiar trill and I almost burst out singing myself. Shortly after I became interested in bird watching, I promised myself I would learn to identify the birds by their songs and calls. "Birding by ear" we call it, and it has proven to be one of the longest, most humbling, yet sublimely fulfilling challenges of my life.

As I explain to school children, you already know how to identify objects by their sound. You can tell whether an approaching vehicle is a motorcycle, car or truck before you ever see it. You know the voice of your parent, spouse or child. You can recognize a Beatles song or a Beethoven symphony by a short series of notes or even a single chord. You have the tools. You simply lack the familiarity.

You learn to bird by ear the same way a pianist attains proficiency to play in Carnegie Hall: practice, practice, practice. Start with birds that visit your yard. Common birds like American Robins or Song Sparrows are good for starters. My first "pocket bird" was the Black Phoebe. I watched it from my kitchen window and heard its simple song each day. As in learning any language, repetition is the key to mastery. By starting with the familiar, you will receive constant refresher lessons that will aid your success.

Break the complex study of bird communications into many small lessons, otherwise you will be overwhelmed. Learn one song at a time. It helps to look at the singing bird. Most of us are primarily visual learners, so augment the aural memory with the visual image.

There are some great tools available now. There are wonderful applications for I-Phones, which are very convenient in the field. Many of us learn through tapes. Ron LeValley has a very good two-CD set titled "Bird Voices of Northern California." I rely on "Bird Songs of California" by Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology because of the variety of songs and calls for each species. There are many others; in fact I possess five sets for this region alone. So find one that "speaks to you" and begin to train your ear for the nuances of pitch and pattern. Also, use the recordings to compare similar sounding songs.

Finally, go out with someone who can help you learn you. Come on bird walks and field trips. On **May 1 and 2**, Ron LeValley and I will host a two-day bird identification session for the annual Mendocino Land Trust Big River breeding bird survey. The training will start at the Botanical Gardens at 9:00 on Saturday. Then at noon we will meet for an indoors session. Sunday morning we test our skills along Big River. Contact Matt Coleman at **962-0470** to sign up for the free training session.

The best advice I can offer is to stick with it. Don't get frustrated. It takes most of us longer than we think it should, but one spring you will find that you still remember the lessons from previous years. And when you get it- it's magic!

PAM HUNTLEY ON KXYZ FM 88.3, 90.7, AND 91.5**EUROPEAN STARLING**

Adult non-breeding European Starling. Photo Dennis Bowling.

A friend once asked me what beautiful bird was it that bravely sang so melodiously, so close to him. I sighed as I told him it was the European Starling.

He is right; the European Starling is a beautiful bird. By spring their white-speckled chest feathers become iridescent black and green. They have pink legs and a bright yellow beak. A pale blue on the lower mandible can distinguish males. The female bill is pink at the base and is a paler yellow. Non-breeding adults and juveniles are speckled and have brown bills. All measure around 8 ½ inches in length.

European Starlings are pests. They were introduced by the Shakespearean Society, which planned to introduce into Central Park every bird mentioned by Shakespeare. In 1890, 60 birds were released, another 40 the next year. Since they are 'habitat generalists' they survive almost everywhere. They eat a huge variety of food. They are adept at nesting in urban settings using buildings and other structures and almost any cavity, especially savoring old woodpecker holes. They out-compete other hole-nesters such as bluebirds, woodpeckers and Purple Martins. Within 60 years they had reached the Pacific. In a century their numbers reached over 200 million, 1/3 of the world population.

Their rambling songs can imitate birds, mechanical squeaks and grinds, mewling cats and barking dogs. In spring the male advertises with song that he has found a nest site and he carries a flower or leaf in and out of the nest. Once the female accepts, she takes over the nest building, using grass and twigs. She lays 4-6 blue speckled eggs. She does most of the incubation but both feed the young. Fresh greens are added to the nest as a 'fumigant' to help rid the young of parasites. In good years they will have two or even three broods.

**LEAVING A LEGACY TO MENDOCINO COAST AUDUBON SOCIETY**

You can contribute to Mendocino Coast Audubon Society's work with our citizen science Save Our Shorebirds and nest monitoring programs; our efforts to bring nature education programs to adults and children in Mendocino County; and our labors to protect our important bird habitats. Please consider a gift to our chapter when planning your estate. To discuss confidentially how you can name Mendocino Coast Audubon Society in your will or estate plan, please call President David Jensen at 964-8163.

NEW STUDY: CLIMATE CHANGE THREATENS HUNDREDS OF SPECIES

Becky Bowen

We might think there is nothing new under the sun and maybe that's true. But now comes a major new study about global warming that brings bad news for birds.

The State of the Birds: 2010 Report on Climate Change, released in Austin, TX, March 11 by Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar, says climate change threatens hundreds of species of migratory birds. The report hits home because it specifically mentions birds that we frequently see along the Mendocino Coast – including Surfbirds, Black Oystercatchers, Common Murres, Black Turnstones and others.

“For well over a century, migratory birds have faced stresses such as commercial

hunting, loss of forests, the use of DDT and other pesticides, a loss of wetlands and other key habitat, the introduction of invasive species, and other impacts of human development,” Salazar said. “Now they are facing a new threat – climate change – that could dramatically alter their habitat and food supply and push many species towards extinction.”



Black Oystercatcher and chick

Photo Ron LeValley, levalleyphoto.com

The report is a collaboration of scientists from several organizations including American Bird Conservancy, Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Klamath Bird Observatory, National Audubon Society, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, The Nature Conservancy, U.S.D.A. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the U.S. Geological Survey.

Here are two key findings:

- Oceanic birds are most vulnerable because they nest on islands that may be flooded as sea levels rise. All 67 oceanic bird species are vulnerable to climate change.
- Birds in coastal, Arctic and grassland habitats show intermediate levels of vulnerability. Most birds in arid lands, wetlands, and forests show relatively low vulnerability to climate change.

On the Mendocino Coast, we are connected to the fragile Arctic environment by birds that rest and feed here during their migration from the Arctic Circle to Central/South America.

NEW STUDY: CLIMATE CHANGE THREATENS HUNDREDS OF SPECIES

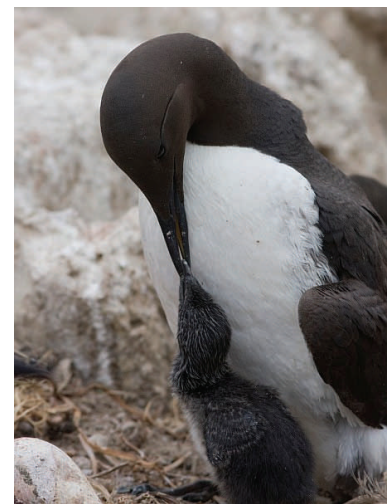
The study follows last year's State of the Birds report that said nearly a third of the nation's 800 bird species are endangered, threatened or in significant decline. The culprit is concentration of greenhouse gases (mostly carbon-based) in the atmosphere that trap the sun's radiation and warm the globe. Emissions come from human activity. For millions of years climate changed slowly, but man's activities have caused rapid changes since the Industrial Revolution.

While the current study sounds the alarms for birds, it also suggests solutions, including on-going research. The Mendocino Coast Audubon Society currently participates in two local studies: Biologist Ron LeValley coordinates a program on the Sonoma and Mendocino Coast that monitors cormorant nesting colonies with the intent of understanding how local ocean conditions are responding to global climate change in our coastal waters. Save Our Shorebirds is an on-going citizen science project in partnership with State Parks, College of the Redwoods and FLOCKworks that monitors shorebirds on three MacKerricher State Park beaches.

The State of the Birds report is at
www.stateofthebirds.org



Surfbird



Common Murre and chick
photos Ron LeValley,
levalleyphoto.com

OUT OF THIS WORLD SPECIAL OFFER

James Blackstock and Marilyn Rose of that wonderful Mendocino store, Out of this World, will pay the state tax on any purchase of any binocular or spotting scope they carry. Let them know you are a member of Mendocino Coast Audubon Society. Before you buy, you can test the optics on local gulls, Osprey or even Gray Whales as they pass the store.



SPOTTED TOWHEE**Donald Shephard*****Pipilio maculatus***

Spotted
Towhee
photo
courtesy
Nature.

Enjoy a slow stroll through the woods and thickets in the Botanical Gardens and you might hear some scritch-scratching in the leaves and underbrush that sounds like a squirrel rustling. Look low in shrubs or along the ground in places with rich leaf litter and dense stems. Often the sound emanates from a Spotted Towhee, hopping over the ground beneath dense tangles of shrubs, scratching in leaf litter for food. It makes a lot of noise for such a small bird. You might also see one bathing in dew or fog drip on vegetation or, on occasion, eating at a suet or seed feeder. Spotted Towhees are likely to visit – or perhaps live in – your yard if you’ve got brushy, shrubby, or overgrown borders. If your feeders are near a vegetated edge, towhees may venture out to eat fallen seed. If you want to attract towhees to your feeders, consider sprinkling some seed on the ground, as this is where towhees prefer to feed.

When you catch sight of one, the deep chestnut flanks and sides combined with the male's solid black head, red eye, and black upperparts are striking. They are gleaming black above, spotted and striped with brilliant white. Birds can be hard to see in the leaf litter, so your best chance for an unobstructed look may be in the spring, when males climb into the shrub tops to sing their buzzy songs.

The Towhee uses the “double scratch” method of foraging. In one sequence, with a relatively stationary body, a slight hop allows the feet to reach far forward, and then kick back leaf mould to reveal primarily seeds. In the breeding season they eat and feed their young many insects and other arthropods.

You may wonder why Spotted Towhee is included in a series of articles on sparrows. We must venture from the familiar, but often misleading common names, into the less comfortable

SPOTTED TOWHEE

continued

scientific nomenclature. New world sparrows, all closely related, are called Emberizids by ornithologists. This family of songbirds includes American sparrows, juncos, some buntings, longspurs, and towhees. The majority of Emberizids are brown-patterned, ground-dwelling with short, conical bills. They vary from the small and intricately patterned Le Conte's Sparrow to the large and plain California Towhee. The genus gained its name, *Pipilo*, from the call of the Rufous-sided Towhee while the species name, *maculatus*, simply means spotted. In 1995, the Rufous-sided Towhee was split into two species, the Eastern Towhee and the Spotted Towhee.

Large for a sparrow, 8.5 inches in length compared to the 7 inch White-crowned Sparrow, the Spotted Towhee has a thick, pointed bill, short neck, chunky body, and long, rounded tail. The white-spotted black back, black rump, black breast, white belly, rufous sides, black wings with white spots are distinctive. A black head indicate a male while the female shows a grayish brown head and both have red eyes. Spotted Towhees take short, bounding flights, alternating rapid wing beats with wings pulled to sides. In summer you may spot juveniles with heavy streaking, brown above and buffy below.

Towhees prefer to forage in areas with a thick layer of leaf litter and a screen of foliage and twigs low to the ground which makes them harder to see than to hear. These birds sometimes forage in trees as well, a practice that is most common in spring. Spotted Towhees occasionally sun themselves, lying down on the grass with feathers spread. They have several distinctive calls and songs. Towhees readily respond to 'pishing.'

In March, males proclaim their territories by singing. In April, the female selects a nest site on, or close to, the ground at the edge of a thicket. She builds it with bark, grass, and leaves, and lines it with pine needles and hair. When she builds on the ground, she sinks the nest so that the rim of the nest cup is even with the litter surface. When disturbed, a nesting female may run away like a mouse rather than fly. Cowbirds parasitize Spotted Towhee nests.

She lays 3 to 5 grayish or creamy-white eggs tinged with green and reddish-brown spots which may form a wreath or cap. Incubation lasts for 12 to 14 days. Both parents feed the young who leave the nest at 9 to 11 days, but do not fly for another six days. The parents continue to feed the young, which stay in the home territory for about 30 days after they leave the nest.

The conservation status of this species is Least Concern since they are widespread and common. Common or not, the scratching sound may alert you to Spotted Towhees, you may "pish" him into displaying for you, or you may spot her in your garden. In any case, enjoy this colorful and noisy sparrow.



Spotted Towhee nest photo Conan Guard

PELAGIC TRIP



The next MCAS pelagic trip will be Sun, 16 May, 2010, from Fort Bragg. We are happy to have Todd Easterla, Ron LeValley, John Sterling and Rob Fowler as our leaders. The meeting time is 7:30-am for an 8:00-am departure from Noyo harbor aboard the Trek II. There is plenty of free parking near the dock at the Wharf Restaurant on NORTH Harbor Drive.

The cost will be \$105 per person.(\$95 for Mendocino and Lake County residents) Pay by check or credit card.

To pay by check, mail your check payable to MCAS with full names and contact information of your party (email, phone and mailing addresses). Mail your envelope addressed as follows:

C. McAllister - Pelagic
PO Box 332
Little River, CA 95456

Payment by credit card: Please contact Charlene by email with your phone number and your availability, so she can call you. NOTE: credit card approval must be made several days before the trip. Confirmations will be sent out later with directions, food to bring, attire, and preventive measures for seasickness.

MCAS BOARD: SLATE OF OFFICERS 2010-2011

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The MCAS board meets monthly except during the summer. We have vacancies for secretary and conservation chair. If you are willing to take on these duties, or in becoming a board member with other responsibilities, please contact David Jensen at 964-8163.

Sarah Grimes will take over as Education Coordinator without joining the board.

BIRD WALKS

The Mendocino Coast Audubon Society will host two walks at the Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens during the month of April. The monthly beginners' bird walk will start at 9:00 a.m. at the entrance to the gardens on Saturday, April 3rd. Our midweek bird walk will be held on the third Wednesday of the month, April 21st starting at 8:00 a.m.

The beginners' walk, on May 1st, will also start at 9:00 a.m. at the entrance to the gardens

Birders with all levels of experience are invited to attend these walks. Binoculars will be available for those who need them. Admission is free for Botanical Garden members. For more information about these and other activities, please call 964-8163 or visit our website mendocinocoastaudubon.org.

APRIL FIELD TRIP

April 10 Field Trip: 9:00 am, Sea Ranch. On Saturday, April 10th, the Mendocino Coast Audubon Society will host a field trip to view the birds of Sea Ranch. The trip starts in the beach parking lot at 9:00 a.m. Meet at Knipp-Stengle Barn, west side of Hwy 1, Mile Post 53.76.

Interested persons with all levels of experience are invited to join this free event. Binoculars will be available for those who need them. Heavy rain, not showers or drizzle, cancels.

BIRD SIGHTINGS

March 25: Becky Bowen saw a female Long-tailed Duck on the west side of Ten Mile R.

Dorothy Tobkin reported a Rock Sandpiper at Virgin Creek beach lingering with Surfbirds and Black Turnstones.

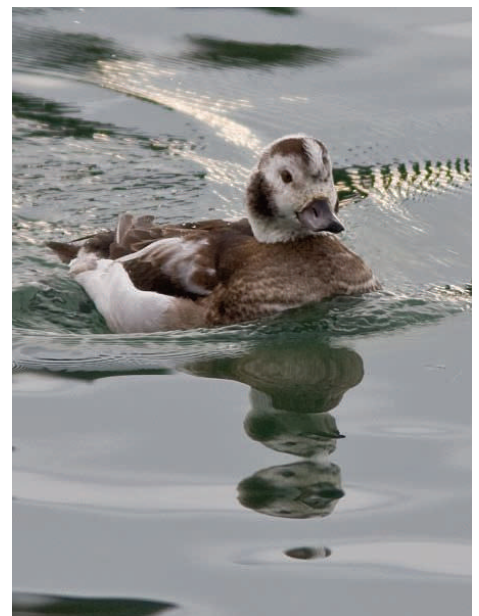
Richard Hubacek saw three Osprey flying and calling over the Woods in Little River.

March 23: Mel Smith found Al, the Laysan Albatross, at Point Arena Cove.

March 21: The Mendocino County Bird Records Committee accepted Ron LeValley's Least Flycatcher observation as MEN's first county record. Sighted at Little River.

March 17: Tree Swallows at MCBG, and March 14 Toby Tobkin saw Violet-Green Swallows during the Van Damme birdwalk.

March 16: Rich Hubacek saw Common Moorhen that has wintered at Lake Cleone.



Long-tailed Duck Photo Ron LeValley, Levalleyphoto.com

Formerly the
Aleutian Goose Festival
May 7-8-9, 2010



Crescent City, Del Norte County, California
70 workshops and fieldtrips
Pelagic Trips~River Drifts~Native American Heritage
Marbled Murrelets~Spotted Owls
register online

www.calredwoodsbirdfest.org



KEYNOTE ADDRESS

National Geographic Explorer-In-Residence

Mike Fay

featured in the October 2009 issue

"Transecting Redwood Forests"

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MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the Mendocino Coast Audubon Society is to help people appreciate and enjoy native birds, and to conserve and restore local ecosystems for the benefit of native birds and other wildlife.

**MENDOCINO COAST AUDUBON SOCIETY
P.O. BOX 2297
FORT BRAGG, CA, 95437**

