BIRDING ECUADOR  
Speaker: Roger Foote  
Monday, January 19, 2009  7:00 p.m.  
College of the Redwoods, Room 300

Bird diversity varies according to latitude, the arctic region has few resident birds, the temperate zone has more, and the tropical belt has the most. Ecuador, sitting right on the equator, is the culmination of this trend: With over 1500 species of birds, Ecuador offers one of the highest bird diversities in the world.

Ecuador's small size (equal to the U.S. state of Colorado) and well-developed transportation system means that this diversity can be easily accessed and experienced even by those with limited time and money. In June of 2007, Roger Foote and his wife Holly Brackman traveled to this South American country with its vast jungles, huge rivers, cloud forests and Andean peaks. A Ukiah resident, Roger will bring his adventure to the coast in January. This program is free to the public, but we welcome donations to help with the cost of presenting monthly programs.
Christmas Bird Count—An Impression
Donald Shephard

Seven birders assembled in the biting cold wind rising from the Pacific into the parking lot on the bluff north of Irish Beach on January 3. We gathered there for the Christmas Bird Count in a segment of a designated circle, Area 3, which includes a portion of the Pacific Ocean. Warren and Ginny Wade left to tour the streets of Irish beach recording every bird they identified. The remaining five birders or “twitchers”, as the British call us, searched our surroundings for movement. Many other volunteers searched other areas of the circle.

David Jensen set up his scope pointing at a pyramid-shaped rock just below us. I saw no movement, in fact, I saw very little as the wind whipped behind my glasses and watered my eyes. David had spotted a Peregrine Falcon roosting almost at the top of the rock. When the bird flew, the pointed wings, narrow tail, and quick wing beats set it in the falcon family. The uniformly patterned under-wing made it a Peregrine. We came across this bird later.

We drove from the vista point parking lot to a red barn up Highway 1. There we crossed a pastured used for fattening young cattle and, once again, we scanned the ocean. Sharp eyes picked up the falcon repeatedly diving at a Red-necked Grebe. The falcon remained above the water while the grebe made frantic dives interspersed with short dashes to the surface to breathe. The grebe prevailed and the falcon returned to his rock. This seaward hunt of the Peregrine Falcon widened my knowledge of the bird. Apparently, local falcons frequently hunt near-shore birds tracking their underwater course from above and stooping on them.

After that round of the life and death battle ended, we turned our attention inland where bobcats in two separate places graced us with their handsome presence. Red-tailed Hawks played on the wind, dangling their legs to stall their progress, and Ferruginous Hawks soared above the cliffs. Yellow-rumped and Townsend’s Warblers flitted among the trees. We tallied many species of birds and added the Area 3 numbers to the list of 137 seen in the designated circle. Art Morley will tally the results and wing them off to National Audubon. We will report them to you in the February newsletter.

By noon, the wind calmed and the temperature rose enough to allow us to pocket our gloves. Birds, particularly passerines hunker down during cold windy weather and yet the day proved satisfying for human observers. Any day spent roaming the countryside recording the number and variety of species found, is a day to remember. Join us next year on the Christmas Bird Count and you will undoubtedly see something beautiful, something amazing, something to make you think; all that and good company too, what more could you ask.
**BIRD WALKS**

The Mendocino Coast Audubon Society will host the following walks this month at the Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens. Weather permitting, the midweek bird walk will be held on the third Wednesday of the month, January 21, at 8:30 A.M. Please note that the January 3 beginners’ bird walk has been cancelled due to a scheduling conflict with our Christmas Bird Count. The next beginners’ bird walk will be held on Saturday, February 7, at 9:00 A.M.

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 on these and other activities, please call 964-8163 visit our website: www.mendocinocoastaudubon.org

**UPCOMING FIELD TRIP**

On Saturday, February 14, the chapter will host a field trip at MacKerricher State Park to view the birds of Lake Cleone and Laguna Point. Participants for this trip should meet at the Lake Cleone parking lot shortly before 9:00 a.m. Weather permitting, this field trip should end around 1:00 p.m.

Birders with all levels of experience are invited to attend these walks. Binoculars will be available for those who need them. For more information on these and other activities, please call 964-8163 visit our website: www.mendocinocoastaudubon.org
AT HEADLANDS STATE PARK: THE WHITE-TAILED KITE

Donald Shephard

Take a walk with me along Heeser Drive starting at Lansing and going around to Lake Street, we will likely see a pair of White-tailed Kites hunting, especially in early morning or late evening. The kite thrills us by soaring up to meet the sea breeze and hovering while searching the grass below. Our careful observation will reveal they remain in the same position for about a minute with a number of possible results: a descent to a lower level to hover; a flight to hunt elsewhere; a dive to capture prey; an interaction with another bird; or, a return to a perch.

When diving to capture prey, kites descend at an almost vertical angle, which they may modify in speed and direction. The legs hang down until the hunter dips to between ten and three feet from the ground. Then the kite increases its dive speed by bending the body forward, raising the tail, and tucking the legs under, while keeping the wings upright to control balance. If successful, the kite emits a series of rasping sounds we can hear a hundred yards away.

Black shoulders and dangling legs on a hovering, white bird diagnose this species along with the decidedly rounded tail and long, pointed wings with a span of about 40 inches. The White-tailed Kite has a short, dark, hooked beak, red eyes, gray wings and back, under-wings gray with a dark patch at the bend. The hovering kite holds it wings high, beating them slowly with short strokes, its tail and legs down. That posture accounts for naming the child’s toy after this master of hovering.

As we descend the north end of Heeser Drive, we pass a favorite roosting post for a juvenile bird. Young White-tailed Kites sport a buff colored wash over much of their bodies and the forehead shows white with a mostly cinnamon crown. A warm brown streaks the back and breast of young birds and they show a dark band at the tip of the white tail and yellow eyes.
In January, the adolescent bird undergoes the last of the molt and renews the scapulars, the area where the upper wing joins the body, and the retrices or tail feathers. The youngster is practically an adult by spring.

As we proceed around the corner where the sea birds roost on the offshore rocks, we may witness a kite dive. Field mice, wood rats, pocket gophers, ground squirrels, shrews, small birds, small snakes, lizards, frogs, grasshoppers, beetles and other insects make up the varied menu for our avian companion. Like owls and other birds of prey, the White-tailed Kite regurgitates a pellet. Analysis of the pellet would likely show that field mice constitute the main diet.

The Mendocino Headlands State Park provides typical grassland habitat for this bird as does the Point Cabrillo Light Station where you will find another pair hunting. In each location the White-tailed Kite builds its twig nest in the tops of trees or shrubs at the edge of the foraging area. They line the nest with grasses, weed stems, rootlets, Spanish Moss, or strips of bark.

You will notice that the Northern Harriers, that hunt the same grounds in low swoops across the grass, enjoy immunity from the kite’s aggression to other hawks and ravens. Perhaps this hostility results because kite nests, while concealed from the ground, are vulnerable to flying predators.

As we approach the corner of Heeser Drive and Lake Street, watch and listen. With luck, we will see a successful hunter and hear it call its mate from the nest. The hunter hovers as the nest minder approaches below, flips its body upside down and grabs the offered mouse before returning to the nest. The Northern Harrier completes a similar exchange without the hover. As their paths cross, the male harrier drops the prey, which the female grabs in midair and takes to feed the young.

The ability to hover gives the White-tailed Kite an advantage today but not so in the past. Arthur Cleveland Bent called this species abundant prior to 1870 in the middle districts of California and the coast. After 1900, various cartridge companies held gun club hunts to exterminate owls, hawks and crows. Kites, because of that habit of hovering, became widely shot by hunters, gamekeepers and ranchers. Rigid protection by law and exemption from collecting permits resulted in a resurgence of this hovering rodent control that benefits the people who persecuted it. Now, we will leave the hunting ground of the White-tailed Kite and walk up Lake Street to contemplate that, indeed, to fly is avian but to hover is divine. What a lovely walk.
VOlunteers see shorebirds through artists’ eyes
Becky Bowen

Science is art and art is science, so inevitably the Save Our Shorebirds volunteers practice what they preach and take citizen science research to a new artistic plane.

SOS volunteers participate in shorebird surveys on MacKerricher State Parks beaches to promote an increase in shorebirds and a decrease in disturbances.

Volunteers began daily beach summer surveys on-foot in 2007 under the guidance of California State Parks Environmental Scientist Angela Martin Liebenberg. Director Nathan Cooley meticulously recorded findings. SOS people include experienced as well as beginning birders. New birders taught us to see shorebirds through new eyes. Since many of those eyes belonged to artists, we began to see shorebirds as graphic images.

Children inspired us. Posters created by local school children in the 2007 Save Our Shorebirds contest were stunning. Clearly, pupils saw shorebirds as interesting and paint-worthy.

At that point, data flowing in confirmed what local experts had told us for years: Our shorebirds are in trouble. It was time to turn to solutions including outreach and education.

We saw art as a conservation teaching tool and turned to College of the Redwoods, a supporter and partner. In April, the school will award a $1,000 art scholarship. The award is subsidized by our new TogetherGreen grant and matching funds. TogetherGreen is an Audubon program with funding from Toyota. An art professor; a science professor; and Ron LeValley, biologist and nature photographer, will select the scholarship recipient. The honored art piece will be our SOS logo.

Art students, who never before considered shorebirds as subjects, began their study last semester. “It was wonderful for us,” CR Art Professor Bob Rhoades said. “We were creating images of all these wonderful birds with Dr. Seuss names like Marbled Godwit and Ruddy Turnstone.”

Mission accomplished.

It is a magical thing to see people begin to look at shorebirds and appreciate them. If they appreciate shorebirds, they will care about them. If they care about them, they won’t harm them.

Snowy Plover on Ten Mile Beach

Photo by Ron LeValley

www.LeValleyPhoto.com
VOLUNTEERS SEE SHOREBIRDS THROUGH ARTISTS’ EYES
continued

From the Virgin Creek Series by SOS Volunteer Joan Stein Carroll

We are compiling a final report for the National Audubon, Audubon California and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation about our first two years of research. Our data will be available to the public, schools and libraries. It will have descriptions, graphs, raw data—and a cover.

That’s where Joan Stein Carroll comes in. Joan is a water-colorist. She cheerfully agreed to train as an SOS volunteer even though she had never looked at a bird through binoculars. She went to SOS training and attended a Mad River Biologists class about Snowy Plovers. Her weekly shorebird surveys inspired a Virgin Creek series of landscapes and seascapes. One of her pieces will be the cover art for our SOS report due in February.

Sadly, Joan moved to Santa Cruz a few weeks ago, but she writes: “As I’m sure you know, our walks together at Virgin Creek have forever enlightened my life. Discovering the amazing shorebirds has given me new world to explore and enjoy. There is no end to learning and growing and being excited about a new day.”

Mission accomplished.

This story is dedicated to the memory of two artists: Bill Martin, who followed our story and gleefully posed the greeting, “How are things going in Ploverdale?” and Nancy Paquette, who conducted Save Our Shorebirds surveys with Art Morley at Glass Beach.

Joan Stein Carroll on a Save Our Shorebirds Virgin Creek survey
LEARNING BIRD BEHAVIOR TURNS KIDS INTO SCIENTISTS

Cornell Lab of Ornithology

Revised teaching unit is released from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology Ithaca, NY--Why is that crow chasing a hawk? Do birds fly away from noisy places? How long will an American Robin spend pulling a worm from the ground? The BirdSleuth curriculum from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology is all about tapping into a child’s natural curiosity to answer scientific questions in a fun way. The just-released revision of the Exploring Bird Behavior module offers educators even more lessons, posters, and multimedia resources. The new student toolkit comes with two important tools for collecting behavioral information about birds: a BirdSleuth stopwatch and tally counter.

“Kids love to work with gadgets,” says BirdSleuth project leader Jennifer Fee. “Give them a stopwatch or put them in a lab coat, and they transform into little scientists. And then it becomes easier to explain tricky concepts, such as the difference between a behavioral event and a behavioral state.” (An event can be counted; a state can be timed.)

This module also comes with a DVD showing bird behaviors most students have never seen, including stunning slow-motion video of the exotic courtship dance of the Greater Sage-Grouse. A 32-page teacher’s guide includes step-by-step instructions for completing all six lessons, or “investigations.”

The Exploring Bird Behavior module, like the others in the BirdSleuth series, engages students in inquiry by building lessons and activities around citizen-science projects from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. This module uses the Crows Count project. Students count crows and their relatives (ravens, magpies, and jays), observe their behaviors, and report what they see to the Cornell Lab where scientists are studying the dynamics of group behavior in crows.

“BirdSleuth gets kids interested in nature, gets them outside, and teaches them to think more critically,” says Fee. “They ask questions, collect data, look for patterns and evidence, test ideas, make conclusions, and share results.”

To learn more about the new Exploring Bird Behavior module and about the entire BirdSleuth curriculum, visit www.birds.cornell.edu/BirdSleuth.edu. The staff is happy to answer any questions about how to make BirdSleuth a welcome supplement to your existing science curriculum.

Contact: Jennifer Fee, Project Leader, (607) 254-2403, jms327@cornell.edu

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology is a membership institution dedicated to interpreting and conserving the earth’s biological diversity through research, education, and citizen science focused on birds. Visit the Lab’s web site at www.birds.cornell.edu.
THE QUOTABLE BIRDER

Lying under an acacia tree with the sound of the dawn around me, I realized more clearly the facts that man should never overlook: that the construction of an airplane, for instance, is simple when compared with a bird; that airplanes depend on an advanced civilization, and that where civilization is most advanced, few birds exist. I realized that if I had to choose, I would rather have birds than airplanes.

-Charles A. Lindberg, interview shortly before his death.

From the Quotable Birder, edited by Bill Adler Jr.

PAM HUNTLEY ON KXYZ FM 88.3, 90.7 and 91.5

Pam broadcasts on KXYZ once Tuesday evenings on Community News at 5:00 pm with Christina Anastat. The segment is rebroadcast on Friday mornings at about 7:55 am. Here is a sample of a recent airing.

I’m Pam Huntley for the Mendocino Coast Audubon Society. The American Robin must be the first bird most people identify, Robin Red-breast with its gray back and the male’s darker cap. Their song takes me back to childhood reminding me of warm spring nights. Their Latin name is one of the few I remember, *Turdus migratorius*. What birders call “the Turd Bird”. *Migratorius* is fitting as we see the large flocks on our lawns. Robins cock their head to look for the worm not listen. They also feed on insects, fruits, and berries. They were eaten themselves by people in the 1800’s. Their numbers have increased as trees and lawns have expanded across the country.

In spring, the large flocks break up and the males fight with each other, and their own reflections in windows and the shiny parts of automobiles. The nest is an unkempt base of twigs and grass and the inside cup is lined with mud and fine grass that holds the baby-blue eggs. They usually have two broods a season. The male feeds the fledglings of the first brood while the female incubates the second clutch.

Robins served as Rachel Carson’s canaries in her book *Silent Spring* which made the connection between DDT and the death of our songbirds. Now they serve as the reminder of another of nature’s great comebacks.

For the Mendocino Coast Audubon Society, I’m Pam Huntley wishing you “Happy birding”.

Photo Robert McCaw, Cornell.
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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.

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