

The

AVOCET

Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society

Spring 2023 · Vol 71 Num 2



Valley Oak Matthew Dodder

SPEAKER SERIES

BRIAN SULLIVAN

Wed, March 15 at 7 pm
via Zoom



Sullivan currently manages the Cornell Lab's Birds of the World project and has been a driving force behind the creation of the eBird platform. He will discuss his past and current projects and answer questions.

SPECIAL EVENT

SPRING BIRDATHON KICKOFF

Wednesday, March 22

More details at scvas.org

Just... *Matthew Dodder, Executive Director*

Anyone who has ever attended one of my field trips knows I have a cardinal rule: Never use the J word! J is for "just" which, on its surface seems harmless enough. But it can also be a disparaging word, a destructive word, dismissive of the birds value and anathema to all we as naturalists and birders stand for. I'm talking about "just" in the context of "'Oh, it's *just* a Song Sparrow" or "It's *just* another Red-tail". Nails on a blackboard... "Just" is a subtler, but equally ugly expansion of the infamous term "garbage bird", and I avoid it entirely.

Last month, we celebrated the Great Backyard Bird Count which to a large extent was created to introduce people to the wonders of birding—by focusing on the common birds we have in our neighborhoods and gardens. The intention was not to hold the rarities up, or emphasize the exotic—the Painted Redstart or Red-flanked Bluetail vagrants of California... Those are not productive targets of our undivided attention. Wonderful, yes. Special, absolutely. But no more worthy of celebration than our California Towhee or House Finch. Beginners don't care about the fantastic rarity. They care about what they are looking at. We should too.

You may recall an article I wrote for the Fall 2021 Avocet entitled "Shoshin—the Beginner's Mind" where I encouraged us all to have the same level of fascination and wonder at our common birds that beginners have of everything. In adopting that attitude, we find satisfaction everywhere we look. We no longer rate a bird's value—we celebrate them all. Equally and with enthusiasm.

As we head into Birdathon season where we will all help others find joy in the birds around us, we should celebrate the common and not elevate the rare alone. I keep thinking, that at some point, someone, somewhere must have said to the person beside them... "it's just another Passenger Pigeon." You already know how that story ends. ●



Birdathon Team at Calero County Park in 2022
Matthew Dodder



Passenger Pigeons, 1829
John James Audubon



Greater White-fronted Goose
Bill Bousman



Scaly-breasted Munia

Spring Birdathon

Each spring, SCVAS opens its annual Birdathon. It's a fundraising event that we look forward to every year and it's been going on for well over three decades! This year it runs March 25 – May 7.

The 6-week event invites birders to search for and identify as many different birds as they can find. The more species found, the better for our Education Program because participants are also encouraged to find sponsors for their efforts. Join an existing team, or start your own. Friends, family members, and co-workers are typically asked to pledge their support for teams with a dollar amount per bird, or with a generous donation. The "winners" come in two styles dictated by how many birds they locate, and more importantly how many dollars have been raised for the chapter.

Teams come in all shapes and sizes and in a variety of formats from short 4-hour teams, to great big 24-hour ones. Some remain in one spot (big sit) and others cover the entire county (big day). There are bird photography teams, bird sound recording teams, a drawing and painting team, there was even a poetry team one year... If you have an idea for a new team format, you can build your own, give it a name, sign up on our website, and start recruiting your teammates. You will want to set a fundraising goal and start getting contributions right away. The good news is that in-person teams are back this year, and we now have a new 8-hour

FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

category for those who want to bird a few more hours but still get home in time for dinner. <https://scvas.org/birdathon>

There are tons of prizes available for top fundraisers like premium optics, books, artwork, pelagic trips, as well as recognition on our "Champions Wall of Fame" for teams finding the most birds.

It should be no surprise that this has been an especially challenging year with steadily rising interest rates, record inflation and a possible recession everyone has had to watch their finances more closely. SCVAS fell short of our goals for the Annual Appeal, no doubt because of the recent economic climate and our collective uncertainty. I am hoping that our Spring Birdathon however, an event that helps fund our vibrant educational programs for elementary school kids, will get us back on track by attracting new participants and new exciting teams. Let's see if we can make this a record-setting event this year. We'll need your help to make it happen. Bird on!

Matthew Dodder
Executive Director



CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

Stories and totals compiled by *Barry Langdon-Lassagne*

San Jose *Mike Azevedo*

December 18th was a frosty morning. As last year, there was no countdown dinner held, but there is now a countdown video complete with photos of many of the rare birds seen, as well as birders, birds, animals and scenery enjoyed that day by the 86 participants. The video is available on the SCVAS YouTube channel at <https://youtu.be/QP0PRAA-Ki4>.

Greater White-fronted Goose lived up to its emerging reputation as a common bird by showing up in five sectors. No longer a write-up bird, Greater White-fronted Geese seem to be showing up everywhere, 145 in total.

A number of rare bird species, in fact, decided to show up in multiple sectors. **Snow Goose** was seen by Agnews Party 5 and in Alviso. You can check out Bill Walker's photo of 4 Snow Geese on the countdown video. We saw both Cackling Goose (seen in Alviso and 31 of them in Evergreen sector!) and **Eurasian Wigeon** (Seen in Alviso and Calaveras).

Blue Winged Teal was also found in Alviso, as was **Black Turnstone** and **Lesser-Black-backed Gull**. And Calaveras sector had a **Common Loon**, seen by San Francisco Water Department biologist Ben Dubek, who joined us this year to help with Calaveras Reservoir North.

Yellow-Bellied Sapsucker was seen in the Santa Clara/Sunnyvale sector by Sally Teeple's party. **Swallows** had a good showing this year, despite all swallow species continuing to

be write-up birds. **Tree Swallow**, **Violet-green Swallow**, **Barn Swallow** and **Northern Rough-winged Swallow** all made appearances in Alviso, with Tree Swallow and Violet-greens found at Calaveras sector and Tree Swallows also at Ed Levin (East Foothills Sector) and Evergreen Sector.

Summer Tanager and **Phainopepla** also decided to make a mockery of their rare status by showing up in multiple places. Summer Tanagers were wonderfully photographed in both Alum Rock Sector and at the Carmelite Monastery in Santa Clara/Sunnyvale Sector. Phainopepla were seen by two different Calaveras parties, one of which sent in a magazine quality photo. All of these photos can be found in the Countdown video. **Scaly-breasted Munia** made an appearance at Alum Rock, **Tropical Kingbird** in Evergreen and **Painted Redstart** and **Hammond's Flycatcher** at Agnews sector. **Swamp Sparrow** was seen by both Matthew Dodder and Steve Rottenborn in Alviso.

Unexpected misses included Surf Scoter, Sanderling, Northern Pygmy-Owl, Prairie Falcon, and Burrowing Owl, starting a new trend of disappearing for the count. A check of the history of Burrowing Owl sightings for the SJ CBC finds that since 1950, they were seen every year with the exception of 1956, but then again in 2021 and now this year. We hope this doesn't become a trend.

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Lewis's Woodpecker
Mr. Andrew Melnick



Iceland Gull (Kumlien's)
Steve Rottenborn



Phainopepla
Thomas Olson

CBC Continued from page 3

But it isn't all bad news. There were some birds that are often missed but we found them. For example, **Wood Duck** (two seen in Evergreen and one by Agnews Party 4), **Ring-necked Pheasant**, found by Matthew Dodder, and both **Brown Pelicans** and **Short-eared Owls** seen by Mike Rogers, all in Alviso sector. **Horned Lark** was missed last year but showed back up for David Hohmann at Alum Rock this year.

So a nippy start to the day, but it ended well with 171 species being observed.

Palo Alto *Al Eisner*

The Palo Alto CBC was held on Monday December 19 under dry and fairly calm conditions, with cloud cover in most places and a rather chilly start. A count-record 160 participants found a total of 169 species, a few more than our recent average.

The most extraordinary species on the count was the same as last year: the returning **Curlew Sandpiper**, found both years by Mike Rogers at the Palo Alto Baylands. This is only the second appearance of the species on our count and indeed on any California CBC. Also impressive and making its second appearance was the **Plumbeous Vireo**, found by Gerry McChesney at Google in Mountain View. The location was only half a mile from where a wintering bird was seen on the 2019 count, perhaps suggesting that a single individual may have also wintered nearby over the intervening two years.

We also found two species new to the count, exotics which have become established locally, and are now on the state list - hence not really unexpected. First, a flock of 42 **Mitred Parakeets** was identified by Gena Zolotar at Las Palmas Park in Sunnyvale, a known location. Another 7 were identified by Naomi Goodman near San Francisquito Creek in Menlo Park; a party nearby in Palo Alto reported what were presumably the same 7 birds. Second, **Scaly-breasted Munia** has been

spreading recently; some have been visiting a feeder in Palo Alto, where 6 were seen and photographed on count day.

Some other notable species: the count's second **Black-Headed Grosbeak**, a hatch-year male at the Geng Road ball field in Palo Alto; our third appearance of **Tropical Kingbird**, this one at the Moffett golf course (the stakeout at Geng Road did not show); our third **Townsend's Solitaire**, at Monte Bello Open Space Preserve; the 2 Black Oystercatchers which have settled into pond SF2 (along the Dumbarton Bridge) during the past few years, fourth time on count; a **Yellow-Bellied Sapsucker** at Frenchman's Park on the Stanford campus; 3 **Lewis's Woodpeckers** at Felt Lake (private); 4 **BARN SWALLOWS** over Charleston Slough; plus **Snow Goose**, **Snowy Plover**, **Red Knot**, and **Lesser Yellowlegs**.

There were two exciting count-week rarities: 2 **CASPIAN TERNS** at SF2 two days before (same area as our one past count sighting); and a **Cassin's Kingbird** (a species not yet found on the count) at the Moffett Field Golf Course, associating with the Tropical the day after the count!

Six species which have shown up in least 2/3 of recent years were missed: Barrow's Goldeneye, Wilson's Snipe, Barn Owl, House Wren, Pine Siskin and Brown-headed Cowbird. Siskin numbers are highly variable year to year; with none of them, it was unsurprising that we did not find any of the less-regular winter finches. On the other side of the story, the count of **Band-Tailed Pigeons** smashed our previous record (1,695 birds in 2001).

Thanks to Ann Hepenstal, who organized the count effort, to our eight region coordinators, and to the many participants, for a successful day. And thanks to SCVAS for their support.

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LEARNING TO SEE

Michael Hawk
SCVAS Board Member

HOW COVID-19 HELPED SHOW ME THAT MY YARD IS A HABITAT

As I sat at home in the middle of a string of back-to-back work meetings during the early days of the COVID-19 lockdown, I couldn't help but feel a sense of restlessness. Like so many others, my travel, home, and work plans were upended, including some exciting overseas travel with some side-excursions for birding.

But beyond those larger disappointments, I quickly realized there was more at play here. The frantic pace of rushing from conference room to conference room for back-to-back work meetings was a thing of the past. But as I realized, those frantic moments were actually breaks, a chance to move and reset. But when one can change meetings with a click of a button, where would I find my breaks?

Like so many companies, my employer asked us to work from home for "two weeks". But it was clear that there was nothing magical about 2 weeks, and we were in for a long haul. I started wondering how I could be proactive — how could I get my nature fix? How could I get a few breaks from work? How could I restore some balance and mental health? The answer was only a few feet away, outside my San Jose home's backdoor.

Step 1 was to muster the energy to head outside with my camera. When physically and mentally worn, even small steps are a challenge. Compound that with perfectionism, and I'd tell myself "I only have 15 minutes. What possibly can I see? Why bother?" But thankfully I did bother. With my camera in hand, I sat quietly outside. Soon, a beautiful White-crowned Sparrow appeared. A common winter backyard denizen, I wasn't surprised. But the simple photo, sharp and well-framed, looked as if it could have been taken in the wildest parts of California, not my postage stamp sized backyard.

As COVID reality set in, my employer became more lenient — I now had a few breaks everyday! I immediately started seeing

new yard birds. A soaring Golden Eagle, a fly-by Peregrine Falcon. I noticed a bushtit gathering nesting material. By April 1, our citrus trees were in full bloom. But on this day, it was not the sweet fragrance that first hit me when I stepped outside. Instead, it was the 'thrill of the trill' of Selasphorus hummingbirds in flight. The sounds were coming from everywhere! A large push of Rufous Hummingbirds came through over the next few days, giving me seemingly constant photographic candy.

I was having so much fun that I felt obligated to share it with others. I started a Facebook group dedicated to backyard wildlife, and quickly found about 100 others sharing what they were finding. With my new Facebook Group, and as a long-term thinker, I had an idea — could I photograph 365 species in my yard in one year? I did the back-of-the-envelope math...maybe I could photograph 65 or 70 of those backyard "megafauna" — the birds, lizards, and mammals. I'd need to find 300 other species — and they'd have to be arthropods. Until now, my relationship with insects was one of convenience. If I happened upon a dragonfly, butterfly, wasp, or other insect, I'd try to photograph it and perhaps look it up in a field guide later. But now I had a mission.

Learning to See

At first I didn't know how to look for insects. You just kind of stumble upon them, right? I'd head outside, and perhaps notice a butterfly, European honeybee, or the ever-present flies. But occasionally, I'd strike gold — in this case, a gold-tinged insect. I thought maybe it's a native bee? Maybe a wasp? No! It's a fly from a large family known as "hoverflies" (for their characteristic hovering flight) or "flower flies" (because they feed on nectar and pollen). This was the first of 21 species of hoverflies photographed in my yard.

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Rufous Hummingbird
Michael Hawk



Liriomyza Fly
Michael Hawk



Western Aphideater
Michael Hawk

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Matthew Dodder
Executive Director



Avoiding Landscape Amnesia

By late winter, I find myself growing concerned about our breeding birds and the struggles they face on their journey here. I think particularly about the species that are unique to the west coast and one in particular that is a decidedly early-arriving migrant, an airborne fire—**Allen's Hummingbird**. This tiny flame-and-gleaming-emerald bird has already started to show up in our county. In fact, Michael Hawk, one of our board members, reported an Allen's Hummingbird in his backyard on January 22nd. As far as I know this was the first appearance of 2023. Despite seeming very early though—we still have frost in the morning as I write this—it is right on time according to our county checklist. **Watching this schedule gives us something to measure against if it shifts.**

I also wonder about the brilliant yellow **Wilson's Warbler** and the ash gray **Vaux's Swift**. What does the brilliant orange Allen's Hummingbird, a west coast specialty, have in common with these two species? All three are projected to fare poorly in a changing climate. The specific reasons for their anticipated declines are varied and grimly informative. With migrants like these, the potential mis-match of required food, nest resources and arrival dates is possible. That situation exists for many birds, most famously with **Red Knots** on the Chesapeake Bay, where their migration has evolved to coincide with the spawning of Horseshoe Crabs and the trillions of eggs they produce which then support countless birds and many other animals. A single day off schedule can mean disaster for the Knots who have relied on this event for thousands of years to fuel their journey. That's where our changing climate comes into play. We must watch the many small and gradual changes or risk not noticing when they've changed too much. Avoid landscape amnesia... in other words.

Allen's Hummingbird's journey is much shorter and perhaps not as delicately balanced as the Knot's, but it is still at risk. The Allen's Hummingbird's restricted range, which is concentrated on the coasts of Northern California and southern Oregon, is precisely why it has been given a conservation priority of "concern". This species has always favored the foggy coast. As our climate warms and results in large scale aridification, the changed conditions may reduce these foggy areas and the Allen's Hummingbird may be forced to move inland or northward in search of what it needs, specific nectar-producing flowers that do well along the

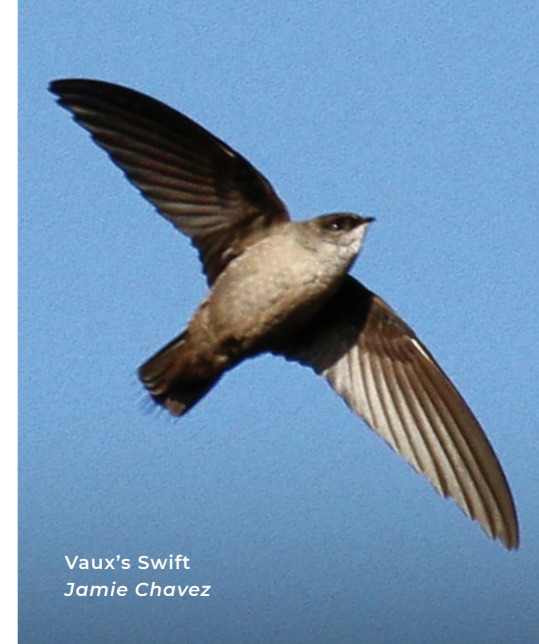
coast. Will the plants that sustain them move along with the climate? Will the Hummingbirds find the food they need?

In the case of the Wilson's Warbler, there was an article in Bay Nature by Oliver James, Spring 2019, describing how some western forests are greening up later each spring, not earlier as they are in the east. As a result some western Songbirds, like Wilson's Warbler, are arriving later to match up with the revised leaf-out schedule. The estimate from the Palomarin Field Station in Point Reyes is that this delay is advancing about one day each decade—that adds up quickly. What is also concerning, and possibly related, is the well-documented decline of Wilson's Warblers in California. Our Bay Area population (subspecies *chryseola*, which shows a richer-than-normal orange-yellow on its face) winters in western Mexico and migrates a relatively short distance to join us here each spring. Other populations winter farther south and summer much farther north. Our Wilsons' Warblers numbers have dropped in recent years and it is unclear why. Unfortunately, the influences acting on our birds are as complex as the weather that buffets them in flight—hard to see and even harder to predict. Oliver James summarizes, "Arrive too early and you risk hazardous weather and starvation; too late and you may be left with an inferior territory in which to raise a family." Possibly the Wilson's Warbler is having difficulty timing things just right. One thing that is clear—the dense willow riparian habitat Wilson's Warblers seek for their nest sites and food supply must be healthy and present to support the species in the future. That may be a challenge in a rising climate...

Learning this gives us a reason to protect what remains.

Finally, I think about Vaux's Swift, the smaller more range-restricted relative of the Chimney Swift. It winters in Central American south to Venezuela and summers as far north as Alaska. Field guides declare the species uses large hollowed trees for its nests and forages high over the tree tops in coniferous forests. True, but in Santa Clara County the Breeding Bird Atlas also documents that our Vaux's Swifts nest in chimneys and forage over large ponds, often on the valley floor. Cornell Lab's Birds of the World website summarizes, "Hollow trees and unlined chimneys are its favored nesting and roosting sites, making the Vaux's Swift vulnerable to loss

Photos L to R:
Allen's Hummingbird, Red Knot, Ridgway's Rail, Wilson's Warbler, Yellow-billed Magpie—Tom Grey



Vaux's Swift
Jamie Chavez



Allen's Hummingbird
Tom Grey



Wilson's Warbler
Tom Grey

of old-growth forest and aging masonry structures. Indeed, recent declines in Vaux's Swift populations have been documented throughout its range where mature forest is dwindling." There has also been a dramatic fall in flying insect populations locally in recent years; I think we can look toward climate change for a partial explanation. **Remembering this allows us to act when something changes—it is a gift of time and memory.**

There are other birds that face an uncertain future due to climate change. Yellow-billed Magpie and Ridgway's Rail and on and on and on... But there are ways we can help. The material available from Cornell and Audubon highlights with increasing clarity the subtle influences pushing against our birds' survival. By submitting your eBird reports, being accurate with the number of individuals you see, we all help the scientific community document changes in populations, such as birds' arrival and departure dates. We shine a light on what is happening—the changing status due to the loss of habitat.

CBC Continued from page 4

Calero-Morgan Hill Rick Herder

84 counters reported 136 species on the 23rd Calero-Morgan Hill CBC on December 26. On land the acorn and berry food crops were abundant, but the count happened just before the big winter storms and water levels were low. We did not find many of the common water birds — no stilts or least sandpipers and fewer gulls than usual, especially the smaller species. However, record high counts indicate continuing growth of some species: **Eurasian Collared-Dove**, **Anna's Hummingbird**, **Hairy Woodpeckers**. Some rare birds like **Lewis's** and **Pileated Woodpecker** have now been reported for 3 years in a row. More swallows may be wintering here, they've been reported for several years. We also had high

Researchers, policy makers and everyone else benefits from current information about the status of our local wildlife. Food and habitat remain the key and our best chance to make a positive change.

If you joined our January Speaker Series with Doug Tallamy, you heard the message of how important it is to provide habitat for birds by reintroducing native plants which then improves biodiversity and supports more insects which in turn feed our birds. Not simply on the large scale, but also at home and in your garden. Like Michael Hawk, who highlights in "Learning to See" the significance of small changes to our surroundings, and Ann Hepenstal's wonderful running column on gardening for birds, Doug Tallamy inspires us all to do our part to help support our birds, whether they come to us from a few miles away or across the continents and oceans.

If we watch, learn and remember it might just make a difference. This season, let's look for that difference. ●

count numbers of **Greater White-fronted Goose** and **White-throated Sparrow**. Steve Rottenborn photographed the first count record of the **Kumlien's** subspecies of the Iceland Gull. Hugh McDevitt reported the most shocking discovery: Chukar! But it was sitting on top of a car in the middle of suburbia, and domesticated birds don't make the CBC list. Dry mild weather made for a nice day out for human counters — the heavy rain started that evening. The 2023 count will be on Sat., Dec. 30.

Mount Hamilton

Bob Hirt and Charles Coston

We had our count on January 2, 2023 and had rainy weather throughout the day. Most of the ponds were open but the water birds were mostly concentrated on the larger bodies of water.

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Gifts received Nov 2022 – Jan 2023

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At first, I didn't know a thing about many of the spiders and insects I was seeing. But I rediscovered iNaturalist, which had greatly improved its machine learning algorithm, and could help identify many of the species I was seeing. And this was another lesson — most animals smaller than a bird can't be identified to species with a photo alone, no matter how good the algorithm. Before long, I found myself heading straight to my *Frangula californica*, or California Coffeeberry, a 2 meter tall native shrub that had become my yard's obvious hotspot. The non-showy flowers were magnets for bees, wasps, flies, and their spider and assassin bug predators. I planted this shrub years ago, having understood it to be a great wildlife plant. But I'd never truly observed it.



Bold Jumping Spider
Michael Hawk

Watching these interactions, I saw Mutual of Omaha Wild Kingdom playing out in my yard, on a small scale, on a daily basis. I saw ants protecting aphids from tiny wasps trying to lay eggs on the aphids. I saw 33 species of spiders employing all manners of hunting methods — ambush, chasing, and using webs to outright capture or simply detect prey. I saw lacewings laying eggs near aphids to provide their eventual larvae a ready food source. I observed eight species of ladybugs — well known aphid predators. I noticed Bewick's Wrens collecting spider webs for their nests (and perhaps a spider meal too). I observed small carpenter bees (*Ceratina* sp) emerge from their nests inside of hollow twigs. And at the center of it all were a few native plants. Yes, some non-native plants served as nectar sources for a few generalist insects. But by-and-large, the roses, day-lillies, African daisies, and other ornamental plants were just that - ornaments that did little more than serve one or two species of insects for a narrow window of their lifecycle. Most of my backyard bird species require insects at some point in their lifecycle. And I now understand the importance of supporting the entire lifecycle of insects. If I want to support birds, I need to support insects. And if I want to support insects, I need to plant native plants.

I fell just short of the 365 species goal but came away with so much more than an arbitrary number. I have a new-found appreciation for the refuge and habitat of the backyard — so much so that I replaced my front yard with native plants. My knowledge of our local ecology expanded more than I could have imagined. And the novelty of "discovering" new insects, new spiders, and other animals continues to bring great joy. And I can't wait to see what my new manzanitas, ceanothus, and buckwheat attract this spring! ●

CBC *Continued from page 7*

We had very little weather-related access problems since Hwy 130 was open and dry. The farm roads were passable with the right 4WD vehicle. However, Isabel Creek was raging and crossing was not safe.

We did enjoy a complete count. Last year after the huge CSU fire of September of 2020 which devastated our count circle, we had a record low count coming in at 80 species but this year we saw some real recovery finding 91 species. We found 5,761 individual birds for the day up from 4,708 the prior year. The highlight this year was raptors with 11 **Golden Eagles**, 12 Bald Eagles, 11 **Ferruginous Hawks**, 47 Red-tailed Hawks, 3 **Merlin** and a count first **Peregrine Falcon**. Thanks to Mike Rogers for analyzing the raptor data to avoid duplication. It was a good year for mergansers with 29 **Hooded** and 17 **Common California Quail** have recovered but not **Wrentit** and **California Thrasher**. Again **Wood Duck** was missed as was **Prairie Falcon**.

Our target species of **Lewis's Woodpecker** and **Lawrence's Goldfinch** were low in number and found almost entirely on a private ranch. A special find was 2 **Townsend's Solitaires** by the Mines Road team.

Thanks to our leaders again: Kirsten Holmquist, Mike Rogers, Leighton Nakata, Mike Azevedo, Charles Coston, and especially, Pete Dunten who hiked through the mud on the Mule trail and took over the Arnold and A to Z ranches in my absence. I am especially grateful to Charles Coston for leading the compilation and compiling the count. We had a record breaking 32 participants this year. Our deepest thanks to our dinner host Elinor Gates for leading the count at the stop, stocking her house feeders, and feeding the hungry bird counters. ●

Learning to See *Continued from page 5*

But most of the time, upon stepping outside following a morning of meetings, all I could see was the backyard megafauna. But after about 10 minutes my "attentional filter" would switch and I'd start to notice all of the small things. The tiny jumping spiders, the aphid colonies hiding out under leaves, minuscule wasps, and whiteflies. Small things such as the *Liriomyza* fly. This 10 minute transition became easier and shorter — a testament to practice and connecting with nature.



Aphids, Ants, and Aphid Wasp
Michael Hawk

Shani Kleinhaus, Environmental Advocate

OUR ADVOCACY TEAM and **ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION COMMITTEE** continue to fight harmful projects and pursue opportunities to better the environment for birds and wildlife in our region. In collaboration with many other organizations, our advocates engage in the larger, high profile issues in Santa Clara County: the future of the Lehigh quarry and cement plant in Cupertino/Los Altos Hills, the Sargent Ranch quarry south of Gilroy, Coyote Valley, Valley Water's One Water planning effort for the Pajaro and the Guadalupe River watersheds, Pacheco reservoir, electronic billboards... and more.

We also take on smaller projects. Members of SCVAS or the community at large often ask us for help. When we are made aware of projects that threaten important bird habitats and wildlife linkages, we use every tool in the advocacy toolbox to lessen the impacts of the project. Advocacy includes submitting comments on Environmental Quality Act Documents, working with planners, decision makers and regulatory agencies, conversations with project proponents, and if absolutely unavoidable - litigation. Some of these engagements take years. We learned to persevere.

The following story highlights a long-term engagement which is still unfolding:

In 2014, SCVAS members alerted us to an alarming situation in the City of Los Altos. A property owner, intending on building 30+ homes on his property at 2100 Woods Lane, started bulldozing a spring, a creek, and the riparian forest. Our member wrote:

"I am interested in the feasibility and the process to start an environmental impact study for the property because it is a riparian corridor with mature oaks and bay trees, a canyon with a creek, two dams and has an abundance of wildlife. The creek usually has water all year but is currently dry. The 9+ acre property is located at the south end of Los Altos and is the last large undeveloped parcel of land in Los Altos."

We could find no CEQA (California Environmental Quality Act) documentation for this project. Inquiries with the City of Los Altos revealed that the planning department considered the creek a "drainage channel" which is "not designated a creek" because the creek without a name (shall we call it No-Name Creek?) was "not recognized by the Santa Clara Valley Water District" and "does not appear on Los Altos Land Use maps". It seems that the City inspected the destruction of the



Property delineation
2100 Woods Lane, Los Altos



Dam and waterfall
No-name Creek, Los Altos



No-Name Creek
Los Altos, after it was cleared of vegetation, 2014

creek and its habitat, concluding that this was maintenance work, and the "clearing of brush" was not a violation. We were flabbergasted. How can a creek with dams, flowing water and wetlands, a creek dominated by riparian vegetation where birds and wildlife thrive (even the special-status Dusky-footed woodrats), be considered an inconsequential storm drain?

Since Los Altos planners insisted that No-Name Creek was not a creek, we submitted a Public Record Request, aimed to reveal the scope of the project and the extent of the City's engagement. Planners asked merely:

"The project should minimize the amount of fill that is placed in the drainage channel/ravine areas in order to respect the existing topography. ... The trees and vegetation in the depression area should also be preserved to the greatest extent feasible, so fill in this area should be minimal."

ALARMED, we alerted the California Water Quality Control Board (which is responsible for the implementation of the Clean Water Act) and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (which is responsible for the protection of special status species and must approve in-creek work). The response was swift. Within days, regulators inspected the damage to the creek and its riparian corridor, and determined that violations occurred, and restoration or mitigation was required. The Army Corps of Engineers delineated the creek and wetlands "jurisdictional waters of the United States". That meant that the property owners could not proceed without restoring the creek - a costly endeavor.

The property was offered for sale.

Over time, the riparian vegetation grew back, and the wildlife returned. Since then, we have been following 2100 Woods Lane as development proposals came and went. We have been supporting and guiding neighbors in their efforts

to ensure that the riparian corridor is unharmed. And we advocate with the city. Most recently, Los Altos included 2100 Woods Lane as part of the City's Housing Element submittal to the state. In January 2023, we spoke at City Council, stating:

SCVAS has followed efforts to build housing at 2100 Woods Lane for several years. The site includes a creek, fast flowing at this time. The site is cherished by residents as a refuge for wildlife and nature. It is one of the few riparian corridors that still has a thriving ecosystem in Los Altos. An unnamed creek runs through the central portion of this parcel which supports an established riparian corridor on the property. There is an endangered species - namely the dusky-footed woodrat - on the property. This creek and its riparian corridor, a unique treasure in Los Altos, should be removed from the Housing Element as potential housing sites.

A few years ago, we were dismayed when the property owner bulldozed the creek, and was cited by the San Francisco Bay Water Quality Board and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. Instead of restoring the site, the owner put it on the market. The creek eventually resumed its flow and the vegetation grew back, but it still is a creek - not a housing building site. Any owner who wants to build here will still have to correct past mistakes, and pay steep fees to regulators to mitigate the damage that was done in the past... We ask you to correct past wrongs, and remove the 2100 Woods Lane parcel from the housing element.

City planners responded that when a project is proposed for the property, environmental review will be required, and "any mitigation required as a part of a project under CEQA would be required to follow the mitigation measures established." However, it seems that the City of Los Altos still does not expressly acknowledge that 2100 Woods Lane harbors a spring-fed creek and wetlands, with all of the environmental sensitivities of this ecosystem. It is still not marked on the City's Land Use map. And the property is listed for sale, again. There is space for some re-development on this property where an educational facility has operated, but we strongly believe that the riparian corridor must be saved, and we will continue to fight for its integrity. This is but one example. Please contact advocate@scvas.org to help us fight projects that can harm important habitat! ●

Web Extras!

New article in Ann Hepensta's ongoing "Bird Habitat at Home":

REDUCING BIRD-WINDOW COLLISIONS

scvas.org/california-native-plants





Field Notes

Please report rarities to pdunten@gmail.com

Pete Dunten
Santa Clara County eBird Reviewer

Swans to Sapsuckers

The pattern of occurrence of **Tundra Swans**, either coastal or in the Central Valley in winter, unfortunately excludes Santa Clara county. Happily, this November four were found on Coyote Lake on 19 Nov (DJ, JSc) and three were at Ogier Ponds on 23 Nov (KH). The group at Coyote Lake consisted of two adults and two cygnets; the three at Ogier Ponds were two adults and one young. A **Ruff** on Alviso pond A9 joined the San Jose CBC on 18 Dec (MMR) and was seen there again on three dates later in December. Likely the same individual was found on Alviso pond A13 on 24 Jan (DSb). A **Curlew Sandpiper** returned to the Palo Alto Baylands for the second winter in a row; it was first noted on 4 Dec (MMR). Last winter the **Curlew Sandpiper** was seen through 15 Mar, and it did not show any signs of acquiring breeding plumage. A **Black Turnstone** on a closed refuge pond on 18 Dec was our first December record (MJM, BB, DMc). A series of back-to-back storms, the so-called pineapple express, pushed **Red Phalaropes** into the south bay this January. An event such as this hasn't happened since the winters of 2002-2003 and 2004-2005. The first Phalarope was noted on 3 Jan on Adobe Creek (DMc). Subsequent reports came from bayside locations, Lake Lagunita, the North Coyote Valley Conservation Area, and Lexington Reservoir (m. ob.). The largest group was a whirl of ten at Lexington Reservoir on 15 Jan (SCR). The last day of rain from the storm series was 16 Jan; the last phalaropes were seen on 26 Jan when a twirl of three were on Alviso pond A13 (GL). A **Franklin's Gull** on Alviso pond A9 on 17 Nov was a nice find (DWn); the gull unfortunately wasn't seen again. Another nice find was an adult **Lesser Black-backed Gull**, seemingly the only gull in a dark tuxedo among the gulls gathered on Alviso pond A12 on 18 Dec (SCR). The local equivalent of a sea-watch at Palo Alto Baylands turned up two **Red-throated Loons** flying over the bay on 15 Jan (SCR). The late-October visits of California Condors to the Pacheco Pass area brought many observers to the area, leading to a Rough-legged Hawk sighting on 5 Nov (SCR). The Christmas Bird Counts in December located the second and third **Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers** wintering in the county, one near Santa Clara University in Santa Clara on 18 Dec (VHg) and one at Frenchman's Park at Stanford on 19 Dec (ZW). The first and only **Red-naped Sapsucker** this winter has been seen since 7 Jan regularly at Ulistac NA (AxD).



Mountain Bluebird
Linda Sullivan



Palm Warbler
Brooke Miller



Rusty Blackbird
Carol Ann Krug Graves

Kingbirds to Tanagers

The first winter that **Tropical Kingbirds** stayed was the winter 2019-2020; in previous years they most often occurred as late fall reverse migrants. The Kingbirds have been found every winter since. One that did not stay more than a day was at Los Gatos Creek CP on 6 Nov (PrS). A second was found along the Penitencia Creek Trail between 14 – 28 Nov (WP, m. ob.). A third was at Lake Cunningham from 3 Dec (WP, KON), with the latest report on 8 Jan. And finally, a fourth was found on the Moffett Golf Course on 19 Dec (MMR, NM). On 20 Dec the Tropical Kingbird at Moffett Golf Course was seen again, together with a **Cassin's Kingbird** (DCn). Single **Plumbeous Vireos** were found in December at two locations, first one at John D Morgan Park in Campbell (LM, GL), then another on the Google campus near Charleston Rd Marsh on 19 Dec (GMc). A **Sage Thrasher** was a one-day wonder at Shoreline Lake on 2 Jan, photographed by a visiting birder (JPM).

Mountain Bluebirds visited briefly in November. One was at Byxbee Park on 13 Nov (WGB) and two were in Coyote Valley along Laguna Ave on 24 – 25 Nov (AHu, m. ob.).

A **Rusty Blackbird**, the 2nd county record, stopped and posed for photographs at Los Gatos Creek CP for only a day on 27 Oct (CKG, DGr). Another drop-in at Los Gatos Creek CP, a female **Black-throated Blue Warbler**, also stayed for only a day on 21 Nov (GLK). It was the 7th county record and our first female. The tally of **Palm Warblers** this fall and winter rose to four with the addition of one at the Palo Alto RWQCP from 30 Oct – 2 Nov (SPv, ABu), one at Sunnyvale Baylands from 25 – 27 Nov (LON), and one at Los Capitancillos Ponds from 30 Nov – 7 Dec (KA, m. ob.). A Tennessee Warbler at Chris Hotts Park next to Los Capitancillos Ponds from 24 Jan (TY) through the end of the period was the first winter record for a warbler more commonly seen during fall migration. The Painted Redstart at Agnews Historic Park in Santa Clara since late September has remained through the winter. Finally, the count of **Summer Tanagers** found this fall and winter rose by two, to five, after one was discovered along the Penitencia Creek Trail on 24 Nov (ChJ) and another at the Carmelite Monastery in Santa Clara on 18 Dec (LV). The tanager along Penitencia Creek has been reported through 8 Jan. ●

Observers Katherine Alsup (KA), Bob Bolles (BB), Bill Bousman (WGB), Adam Burnett (ABu), Dani Christensen (DCn), Alex Dunn (AxD), Carol Ann Krug Graves (CKG), David Graves (DGv), Vinayak Hebbagil (VHb), Kirsten Holmquist (KH), Alden Hughes (AHu), Chris Johnson (ChJ), Dorothy Johnson (DJ), Garrett Lau (GL), Greg Luckert (GLK), Nateri Madavan (NM), Mike Mammoser (MJM), Gerry McChesney (GMc), Diane McCoy (DMc), David McIntyre (DMc), Lisa Myers (LM), Kitty O'Neil (KON), Leo O'Neill (LON), Sergey Pavlov (SPv), William Pelletier (WP), James Pomfret (JPM), Mike Rogers (MMR), Steve Rottenborn (SCR), John Scharpen (JSc), Dessi Sieburth (DSb), Prasad Subbarao (PrS), Luis Villablanca (LV), Zihan Wei (ZW), Dan Wenny (DWn), Tristan Yoo (TY)



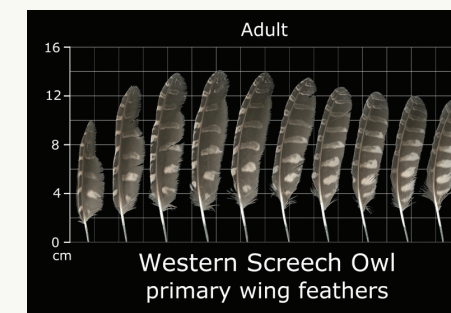
Mystery Feather
Kelly Dodder

This month's feather mystery was discovered by my wife's 2nd-grade class. The kids found the feather in the playground which is bordered by tall redwood trees. They will be very excited to see their contribution in the Avocet. The photo shows a student's hand, which makes the feather about 6" long. Let's see if we can help them identify the bird that dropped this mystery...

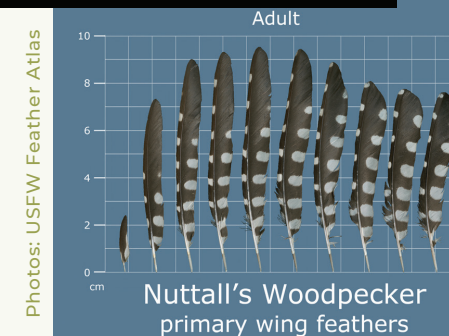
Note The collection or sale of feathers from native species is prohibited by law. If you find a feather, admire it and leave it behind.

Answer (WINTER 2023)

The first thing to notice on one feather is the comb-like structure on the leading edge... a clear indication we are looking at an Owl. The ashy-gray color, small size, and spot pattern points us to the outer primary of a Western Screech-Owl. The lower feather is darker and lacks the comb, but it is also spotted. Combined with the small size, the pattern suggests a primary feather from a Woodpecker, possibly Nuttall's Woodpecker.



Western Screech Owl
primary wing feathers



Nuttall's Woodpecker
primary wing feathers

Matthew Dodder
Quiz Master

TRACK & FEATHER

Photos: USEFW Feather Atlas

2022-2023 SANTA CLARA COUNTY CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNTS

Species	San Jose 12/18/22	Palo Alto 12/19/22	Mount Hamilton 1/2/23	Calero Morg-Hill 12/26/22	Species	San Jose 12/18/22	Palo Alto 12/19/22	Mount Hamilton 1/2/23	Calero Morg-Hill 12/26/22
Snow Goose	5	5	-	-	Ruddy Turnstone	-	2	-	-
Greater White-fronted Goose	145	32	-	35	Black Turnstone	1	-	-	-
Cackling Goose	31	8	-	-	Red Knot	-	5	-	-
Canada Goose	1,856	547	2	471	Curlew Sandpiper	-	1	-	-
Wood Duck	3	3	-	58	Dunlin	51	4,491	-	-
Blue-winged Teal	1	-	-	-	Least Sandpiper	817	1,322	-	-
Cinnamon Teal	95	3	-	-	Western Sandpiper	3,213	9,655	-	-
Northern Shoveler	12,066	7,873	29	25	peep sp.	340	9,135	-	-
Gadwall	214	180	-	55	Short-billed Dowitcher	-	14	-	-
Eurasian Wigeon	11	4	-	-	Long-billed Dowitcher	95	689	-	-
American Wigeon	4,639	2,094	91	23	dowitcher sp.	441	1,832	-	-
Mallard	1,830	654	57	508	Wilson's Snipe	152	-	1	10
Northern Pintail	516	644	-	-	Spotted Sandpiper	16	7	-	7
Green-winged Teal	1,443	1,153	-	26	Greater Yellowlegs	55	57	6	2
Canvasback	958	4,764	5	3	Willet	53	881	-	-
Redhead	189	1,373	-	-	Lesser Yellowlegs	-	1	-	-
Ring-necked Duck	104	148	72	179	Bonaparte's Gull	26	63	-	-
Greater Scaup	450	1,427	-	1	Short-billed Gull	100	9	-	1
Lesser Scaup	1,942	1,219	-	14	Ring-billed Gull	416	289	-	9
Greater/Lesser Scaup	3,961	670	-	-	Western Gull	22	14	-	-
Surf Scoter	-	75	-	-	California Gull	2,226	854	-	701
Bufflehead	744	270	56	139	Herring Gull	4,111	46	-	2,572
Common Goldeneye	152	72	-	7	Iceland Gull	142	-	-	-
Hooded Merganser	24	21	29	38	Iceland Gull (Thayer's)	-	4	-	128
Common Merganser	36	29	17	75	Iceland Gull (kumlieni)	-	-	-	1
Red-breasted Merganser	46	4	-	-	Lesser Black-backed Gull	1	-	-	-
Ruddy Duck	5,231	7,801	131	142	Glaucous-winged Gull	263	23	-	154
Blue-winged Teal X Northern Shoveler	-	1	-	-	Western X Glaucous-winged Gull	-	1	-	3
Eurasian X American Wigeon	-	4	-	-	Herring x Glaucous-winged Gull	-	-	-	5
Northern Shoveler X Mallard	-	1	-	-	gull sp.	5,567	410	-	1,010
duck sp.	4,235	198	-	-	Caspian Tern	-	CW	-	-
California Quail	317	314	491	234	Forster's Tern	108	23	-	-
Wild Turkey	3	57	10	231	Common Loon	1	-	-	-
Ring-necked Pheasant	1	-	-	-	Double-crested Cormorant	544	143	3	104
Pied-billed Grebe	212	72	13	56	American White Pelican	174	61	-	6
Horned Grebe	2	1	-	-	Brown Pelican	6	36	-	-
Eared Grebe	383	47	-	20	Great Blue Heron	52	22	7	84
Western Grebe	147	17	-	52	Great Egret	65	76	1	45
Clark's Grebe	35	5	-	8	Snowy Egret	79	111	-	43
aechmophorus sp.	207	4	-	-	Green Heron	3	1	-	2
Rock Pigeon	1,664	784	40	830	Black-crowned Night-Heron	175	129	-	8
Band-tailed Pigeon	155	2,770	99	1,057	Turkey Vulture	189	145	-	376
Eurasian Collared-Dove	113	22	34	236	White-tailed Kite	7	13	-	12
Mourning Dove	400	428	18	357	Golden Eagle	17	1	11	10
White-throated Swift	40	14	-	9	Northern Harrier	30	26	-	4
Anna's Hummingbird	493	614	3	747	Sharp-shinned Hawk	2	7	2	5
Ridgway's Rail	-	6	-	-	Cooper's Hawk	11	15	1	11
Virginia Rail	23	6	-	1	accipiter sp.	1	1	-	1
Sora	52	15	-	-	Bald Eagle	6	2	12	5
Common Gallinule	8	2	-	2	Red-shouldered Hawk	22	48	2	54
American Coot	4,961	4,183	271	433	Red-tailed Hawk	119	100	47	141
Black-necked Stilt	771	139	-	-	Ferruginous Hawk	-	-	11	8
American Avocet	970	2,228	-	-	Barn Owl	2	-	-	1
Black Oystercatcher	-	2	-	-	Western Screech-Owl	1	5	-	10
Black-bellied Plover	73	123	-	-	Great Horned Owl	13	15	8	21
Snowy Plover	27	7	-	-	Northern Pygmy-Owl	-	-	1	1
Semipalmated Plover	26	114	-	-	Burrowing Owl	-	3	-	-
Killdeer	137	105	30	98	Short-eared Owl	2	-	-	-
Whimbrel	-	33	-	-	Belted Kingfisher	16	10	4	14
Long-billed Curlew	38	97	-	-	Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	1	1	-	-
Marbled Godwit	273	4,830	-	-	Red-breasted Sapsucker	23	11	7	15

Species	San Jose 12/18/22	Palo Alto 12/19/22	Mount Hamilton 1/2/23	Calero Morg-Hill 12/26/22	Species	San Jose 12/18/22	Palo Alto 12/19/22	Mount Hamilton 1/2/23	Calero Morg-Hill 12/26/22
sapsucker sp.	2	-	-	-	House Finch	1,412	1,252	63	703
Lewis's Woodpecker	-	3	13	2	Purple Finch	3	63	1	49
Acorn Woodpecker	327	527	144	804	Scaly-breasted Munia	2	6	-	-
Downy Woodpecker	13	14	5	11	Pine Siskin	-	-	-	2
Nuttall's Woodpecker	115	98	24	97	Lesser Goldfinch	291	619	30	385
Hairy Woodpecker	21	73	26	35	Lawrence's Goldfinch	-	-	37	-
Pileated Woodpecker	-	2	-	1	American Goldfinch	28	14	4	84
Northern Flicker	161	139	21	183	Lark Sparrow	-	-	9	33
Northern Flicker (Red-shafted)	-	-	37	-	Fox Sparrow	32	67	34	18
Northern Flicker (Yellow-shafted)	-	-	-	2	Fox Sparrow (Sooty)	-	-	11	-
woodpecker sp.	1	-	-	-	Dark-eyed Junco	-	-	190	-
American Kestrel	55	15	8	46	Dark-eyed Junco (Oregon)	291	1,761	299	636
Merlin	10	9	3	11	White-crowned Sparrow	2,161	1,149	277	1,090
Peregrine Falcon	11	7	3	1	Golden-crowned Sparrow	646	1,159	211	836
Prairie Falcon	-	-	-	2	zonotrichia sp.	-	-	-	10
falcon sp.	-	-	-	2	White-throated Sparrow	14	9	-	8
Mitred Parakeet	-	49	-	-	Bell's Sparrow	-	-	3	-
Hammond's Flycatcher	1	-	-	-	Savannah Sparrow	231	88	22	42
Black Phoebe	306	232	31	210	Song Sparrow	197	156	10	84
Say's Phoebe	48	11	6	2	Lincoln's Sparrow	18	14	3	6
Tropical Kingbird	1	1	-	-	Swamp Sparrow	2	1	-	-
Cassin's Kingbird	-	CW	-	-	California Towhee	398	342	32	265
Hutton's Vireo	9	17	-	6	Rufous-crowned Sparrow	13	-	-	3
Plumbeous Vireo	-	1	-	-	Spotted Towhee	56	242	26	190
Loggerhead Shrike	2	1	1	4	sparrow sp.	-	16	80	-
Steller's Jay	123	386	16	212	Western Meadowlark	688	269	128	422
California Scrub-Jay	326	403	161	562	Red-winged Blackbird	328	105	74	935
Yellow-billed Magpie	69	-	62	120	Tricolored Blackbird	-	-	54	363
American Crow	980	2,125	23	1,034	Brown-headed Cowbird	506	-	-	195
Common Raven	159	276	69	258	Brewer's Blackbird	447	205	400	833
Chestnut-backed Chickadee	189	748	3	249	Great-tailed Grackle	139	-	-	70
Oak Titmouse	118	358	146	423	blackbird sp.	31	515	236	361
Horned Lark	3	-	-	43	Orange-crowned Warbler	1	6	-	2
Northern Rough-winged Swallow	1	-	-	-	Common Yellowthroat	37	37	-	7
Tree Swallow	66	1	-	17	Yellow-rumped Warbler	1,745	771	3	634
Violet-green Swallow	16	-	-	6	Yellow-rumped Warbler (Myrtle)	10	127	-	20
Barn Swallow	1	4	-	-	Yellow-rumped Warbler (Audubon's)	168	543	2	142
swallow sp.	40	7	-	5	Townsend's Warbler	26	78	-	4
Bushtit	498	757	-	976	Painted Redstart	1	-	-	-
Wrenit	24	158	9	43	Summer Tanager	2	-	-	-
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	236	296	34	220	Western Tanager	-	5	-	-
Golden-crowned Kinglet	5	8	-	-	Black-headed Grosbeak	-	1	-	-
Red-breasted Nuthatch	9	1	-	1					
White-breasted Nuthatch	113	160	69	216					
Pygmy Nuthatch	-	68	-	-					
Brown Creeper	12	47	2	17					
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	CW	-	-	-					
Rock Wren	15	-	-	2					
House Wren	1	-	-	-					
Pacific Wren	-	5	-	-					
Marsh Wren	28	7	2	-					
Bewick's Wren	103	203	1	74					
European Starling	2,092	1,493	551	2,143					
California Thrasher	3	26	4	28					
Northern Mockingbird	118	36	-	84					
Western Bluebird	236	311	100	279					
Townsend's Solitaire	1	1	2	-					
Varied Thrush	-	71	-	22					
Hermit Thrush	241	424	8	176					
American Robin	803	4,088	315	3,561					
Cedar Waxwing	330	955	-	448					
Phainopepla	2	-	4	1					
House Sparrow	153	30	4	70					
American Pipit	123	75	4	91					

Key
bird names in italic: subspecies, hybrids and indeterminate species
sp.: species, as in "*swallow sp.*"
CW: Count Week—seen during the week of the CBC but not on the actual day

San Jose: compiled and organized by Mike Azevedo
Palo Alto: compiled by Al Eisner; organized by Ann Hepenstal
Mount Hamilton: compiled and organized by Bob Hirt and Charles Coston
Calero-Morgan Hill: compiled and organized by Rick Herder

Data reconciliation and aggregation by Barry Langdon-Lassagne.
 Taxonomic order and common names follow the eBird/Clements Checklist v2022 (August 2022).



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