

Birding Bits

By Russ Koppendrayner

Some of the specialty birds of southern California have been high on my wish list of bird species to see for a number of years. Despite a couple of trips to the area, the list wasn't getting much shorter. Since I have a sister living in Pasadena, my visits have been transformed into fine family outings with less birding than I'd originally planned.

In April of this year I circumvented all those distractions by joining a group of seven birders on a nine-day trip led by Brad Schram, author of "A Birder's Guide to Southern California." The itinerary had us meet in San Diego to do some local birding before moving inland for desert birding in the Laguna Mountains and around the Salton Sea. From there we went north of Los Angeles to the Mt. Pinos area, then west to the coast, and down to Santa Barbara, with a boat trip to Santa Cruz Island on the final day.

For me, the trip got off to a rousing start by finding three of my target species at Lake Hodges, our first stop. California gnatcatcher and California thrasher were expected here, but the Lawrence's goldfinch was a surprise at this site. But the highlight of the day was an interaction between a peregrine falcon and a small group of American avocets at the San Diego River mouth. We witnessed the falcon fly in and raise all the shorebirds from the mudflat into flight, except a group of six avocets, who chose to go under water instead. This evasive technique proved to be fatal since the peregrine aborted the chase, and focused on diving at the avocets every time they came up for air. After ten or twelve swoops, one of the avocets breathed a split second too long and was last seen being carried off by the neck in a talon. I had never seen this tactic of defense by shorebirds before, and if this incident is any indication of its effectiveness, I probably won't see it very often again!

The most memorable sighting of the trip occurred on the Cerro Noroeste Road between the village of Maricopa and Mt. Pinos. The terrain here is very hilly and vegetated by grasses. On a far ridge, a black lump was spotted and appeared to move. We stopped to check it out and, through binoculars, there appeared to be two condors; scopes proved there were actually three California condors on a carcass with a flock of ravens waiting their turn. Further inspection revealed that the bird dining, was an adult with an orange head; there two dark-headed juveniles waiting. After the

adult had its fill, it moved aside and the younger birds moved in. To our amazement, the adult soon took off and began to soar along the ridges. As the bird got closer, we could see all the field marks, including the white wing patches and the orange colored head, as well as the wing tags. Yes, these birds were all released from the captive breeding program, but it was quite a pleasure seeing them in their natural habitat and acting and interacting in their age-old manner. This experience was far beyond anything I'd envisioned for this trip.

Enjoy some late summer birding.

Update on Audubon Washington

By Gary Blevins, Chair, Audubon Washington Board of Stewards

I am writing with an update to keep all of you - our valued partners and friends briefed on news that we're certain you'll find of interest.

First, we're delighted to let you know that Nina Carter - who has made such a difference to our mission and vision in several Audubon roles - has agreed to remain as our Executive Director! (We are making her life a little easier with an office move, but more on that later in this memo.)

Second, we're excited about our newly minted Audubon Washington strategic plan designed to protect the birds of the Pacific Flyway. So, whether your heart beats faster at the sight of a "hummer" outside your window or a red tail in flight - we'll be working together in the coming months and years to save habitat for the birds we all love and cherish.

Third, as you may recall, a key part of the Strategic Plan is the "one Audubon" concept. We'll be working closely with all of you, our chapter partners and colleagues, to make that concept a reality on the ground.

Fourth and finally, for business efficiencies we are consolidating our business operations in Olympia around October 1st. We'll continue to have our presence in Seattle at Seward Park, of course, and will have our quarterly events, Board meetings, and speaker's bureau here in the Seattle area. We'll give you more details as they unfold.

We look forward to savoring summer and we wish you and your families time to connect, relax, refresh - and go birding!