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# Sketches

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# SAN DIEGO AUDUBON



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Photos by Ed Henry



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## Sketches SAN DIEGO AUDUBON

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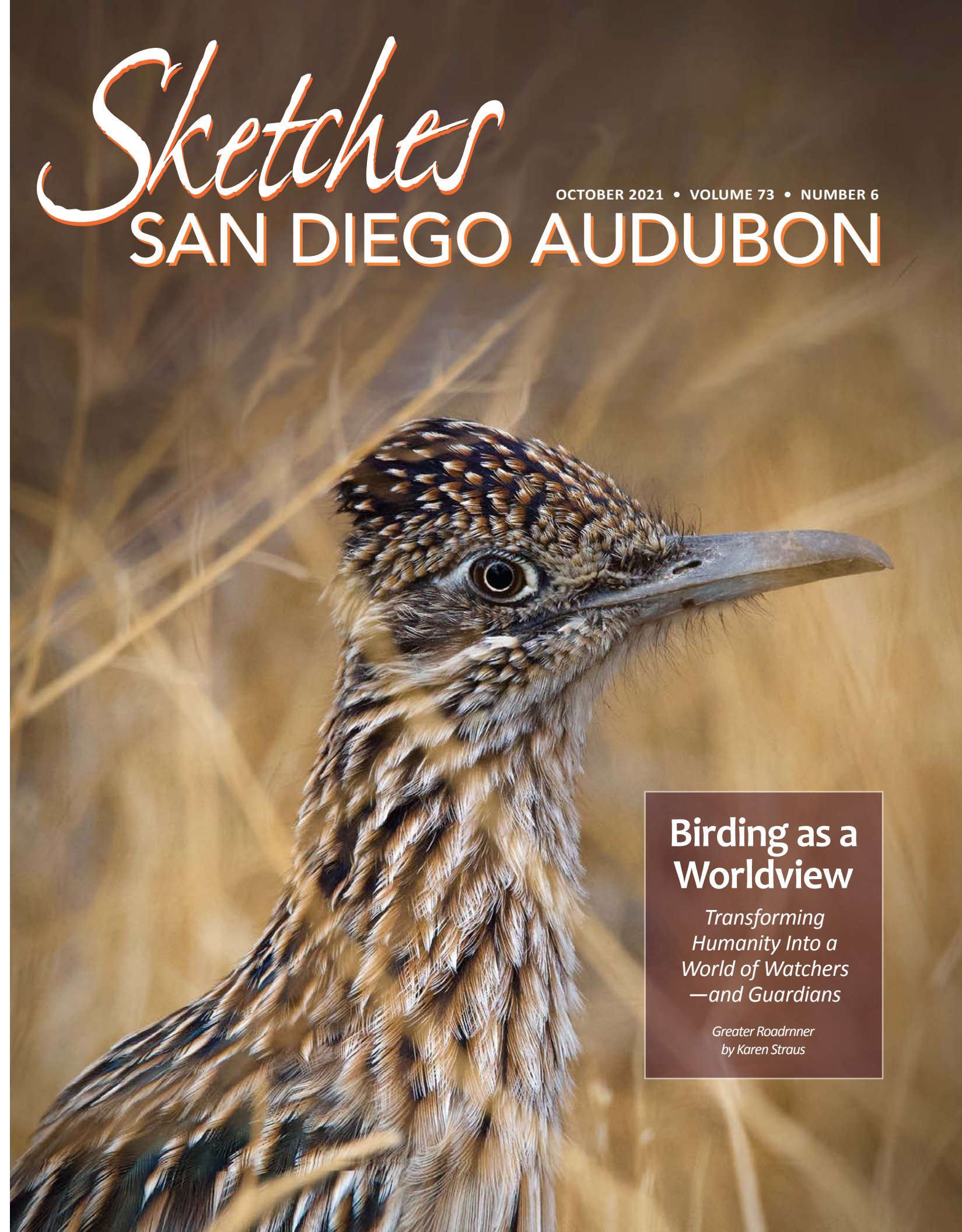
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...Fostering the protection and appreciation of birds, other wildlife, and their habitats...



## Birding as a Worldview

*Transforming  
Humanity Into a  
World of Watchers  
—and Guardians*

*Greater Roadrunner  
by Karen Straus*



## Can Viewing the World Through a Birder's Eyes Help Restore the Planet?

The idea is admittedly a big bite, and perhaps a little pretentious. Fair enough. But consider the many skills that are developed and the knowledge that is acquired in becoming a good birder. Factor in the multiple ways in which birding draws us out of the linear pathways of our work-a-day world and into a complex domain inhabited by hundreds of plants and animals with interwoven dependencies.

As has sometimes been stated, birding is a gateway to conservation. To have a growing sensitivity to the realities a living bird contends with leads us along trails we might otherwise never have discovered. Successful birding requires well-honed skills of perception: alertness, patience, economy of motion, and the ability to refocus quickly from a wide, global "searching" mode to tight attention. Birders may go to considerable effort and discomfort for the chance, just the chance, of spotting their quarry, with the goal of gaining an experience that might be photographed, jotted in a notebook, or logged on eBird. We hunt not for food or a sense of dominance but for relationships based on the layered rhythms of nature.

Consider further the knowledge gained in the pursuit of birds. The 400+ bird species documented in San Diego County represent not a simple list but complex networks, both taxonomically and ecologically. We begin to see patterns that multiply our sense of wonder. "Think globally, act locally," the conservation mantra, comes alive in real ways when we commit our efforts to mastering an awareness of the natural world through birding.

To look briefly at just one familiar name, Roger Tory Peterson, we see a champion of conservation who carries a legacy far beyond the extensive field guide series he is primarily known for. He had a decades-long and deeply influential relationship with National Audubon. He was a key voice in the creation of the World Wildlife Fund and had a close association with the National Wildlife Federation. He threw his full weight behind Rachel Carson (another Auduboner) in her fight against DDT in *Silent Spring*. Roger was a close mentor and friend to E. O. Wilson, David Allen Sibley, and Robert Bateman. For decades Peterson had his finger on the pulse of nearly any important ornithological and environmental cause, on a global scale. Peterson was honored with the Presidential Medal of Freedom and received two nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize. S. Dillon Ripley, the Secretary Emeritus of the Smithsonian Institution, said of Peterson, "He transformed us into a world of watchers." And watchers become guardians.

A big bite to say we can change the world through birding? It's already underway—but with a long way to go. San Diego Audubon is committed to the task.

David Stump, SDAS President

# Birding as a Worldview

## Transforming Humanity Into a World of Watchers—and Guardians

by LaTresa Pearson



W. Tanager by LaTresa Pearson

### Learning from the Past to Protect the Future

As I approach the San Diego Natural History Museum in Balboa Park, I see a man riding up on a red bicycle. This is my interview subject for the day, so I smile and wave as he glides to a stop and dismounts. Phil Unitt, curator for The Nat's Department of Birds and Mammals, leads me into the museum through the staff entrance and up the stairs to the second floor, all the while

hoisting his bike alongside him. It is closed to the public this morning, so there are no people milling about and it's eerily quiet. After going through a few more doors and hallways, Unitt parks his bike and we settle into some chairs to, as he describes it, "get philosophical" about birding. I want to find out why Unitt has devoted his life to the study of San Diego County's birds and how it has shaped his worldview.

"I first really got into birding when I was about 13 years old," he tells me. "My mother had a crummy bird book at home, and I was flipping through it, and I was like, how many of these have I seen? I came up with 30, and it just ballooned from there." Growing up in San Diego, with a mother who, as a kid, used to "run wild" with her older brothers at the Sweetwater River and Cuyamaca Rancho State Park, meant that Unitt was exposed to the outdoors at an early age. Birds factored into the picture early on. He remembers his mother and grandmother talking about the spring arrival of Western Tanagers, as well as seeing huge flocks of Tricolored Blackbirds flying over his parents' house. He makes a point of telling me that his ancestors, Thomas Benton Keeney and Esther Wildes Keeney, arrived in San Diego in 1897. He relates a family story about Esther that indicates just how far back the family interest in birds goes. When she saw Greater Roadrunners dashing across the dirt roads, Unitt says she would exclaim, "Oh look, there goes one of those streetwalkers!" "She was a pious Baptist, so that was a big laugh handed down in the family through the decades," he says, his own hearty laugh filling the room.

As our conversation continues and he takes me to see the museum's library, I realize how central this idea of stories passed down through time is to Unitt and his work in ornithology. "This library is an incredible resource," he tells me. "One of the key things about it is its depth of time. For many of the natural sciences, we have the continuous history from the earliest times up until now." He opens one of the sliding bookcases, revealing hundreds of volumes of ornithological journals, including *The Auk*, *The Condor*, and *Bird Lore*, which became *Audubon* magazine in 1941.

He first discovered this library when he was a freshman at San Diego State University taking a class with Joe Jehl, The Nat's curator for birds and mammals at the time, who was filling in as professor of ornithology while the regular professor was on sabbatical. "That was my first introduction to the museum and our department here and to our library," he says. With an air of reverence, he pulls out a volume of *The Condor*, explaining that this is the publication in which most people in the early 1900s reported their findings. "It's a window into the past. Your average birder is just living in the present.

For me as a student, being exposed to this library and this literature, I was experiencing the whole history as well as the present."

He read, for example, that the Bell's Vireo was considered a "trash bird" in 1905, but he could see that the subspecies found in San Diego County, the Least Bell's Vireo, was rapidly disappearing. "From there, I got involved not only in birding but in conservation-related research," he says. "To me, what's especially interesting and where I and the museum can make its most important contribution is in the conservation issues that are coming over the horizon," Unitt says. In addition to putting together the mammoth *San Diego County Bird Atlas*, which seeks to examine every species of bird documented in San Diego County, he has conducted a variety of research projects, including a study of the effects of Southern California wildfires on bird populations, as well as the decline of another Vireo species, the Gray Vireo. "Change is constant," he points out. "How we respond to that change and ameliorate it the best we can—to be part of that continuing process—is the most important thing I do."

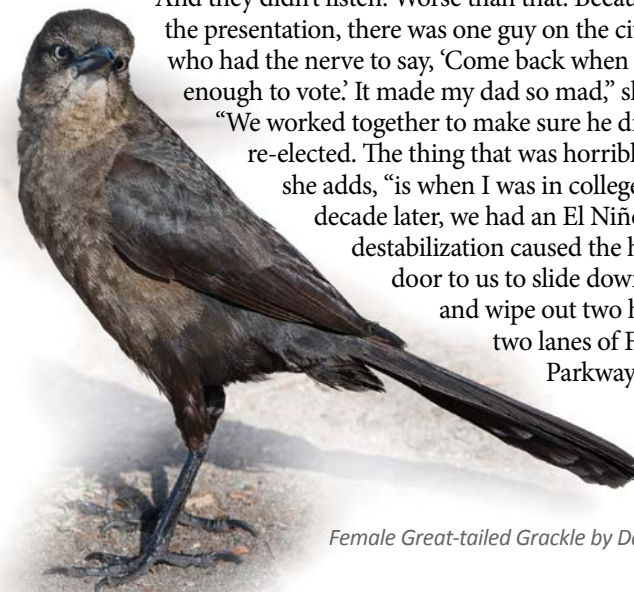
### Changing the Culture

For Lisa Chaddock, Board Vice President for San Diego Audubon and Professor of Geography at San Diego City College, birding and conservation advocacy have been intertwined almost from the beginning. "I was like eight years old when I started really paying attention to birds," she says. She enjoyed watching the Roadrunners and other birds that populated the canyon behind her Fletcher Hills home. It was the first Earth Day in 1970 that began to raise her awareness about the environment and the dangers birds faced from pollution, pesticides like DDT, and habitat destruction. She still has the armband she wore to school in recognition of that day. And then there was the cover photo of the December 1970 issue of *National Geographic*, which shows a seabird swimming in a pool of oil accompanied by the headline, "Our Ecological Crisis." "It broke my heart," she says. "It still does. And I got involved. *I got involved!*" she repeats emphatically.

The first way she became involved was advocating for the protection of the canyon where she lived. Chaddock was 12 or 13 years old when she found out there were plans to build houses in the canyon, so she and her dad created a chart and did a presentation before the El Cajon City Council arguing that it was geologically unsafe to build houses there. She knew the birds would suffer from the loss of habitat, as well. "There were actually oak trees," she sighs.

"And they didn't listen. Worse than that. Because I did the presentation, there was one guy on the city council who had the nerve to say, 'Come back when you're old enough to vote.' It made my dad so mad," she says.

"We worked together to make sure he didn't get re-elected. The thing that was horrible about it," she adds, "is when I was in college almost a decade later, we had an El Niño, and the destabilization caused the house next door to us to slide down the hill and wipe out two houses and two lanes of Fletcher Parkway."



Female Great-tailed Grackle by David Stump

As Chaddock and I sit at a picnic table at Lake Murray surrounded by a busy and very noisy group of Great-tailed Grackles, an Osprey flies over us with a large fish in its mouth. "Yay!" she cheers. "He's got a fish." We watch as it perches on top of a tall utility pole and begins devouring his breakfast. As we resume talking, I get the sense her childhood experience with the El Cajon City Council is one of the reasons she works to empower students at San Diego City College where she formed an Audubon Club in 2013. Beginning with just five students, the club has grown to nearly a hundred members. With grant support, Chaddock hired some of the students to survey the number of birds and butterflies on the campus. "We found three hummingbirds and like half a dozen pigeons," she says. "We found no butterflies. We looked everywhere for butterflies and found no butterflies." This was devastating to Chaddock, who remembers standing on her street as a child being engulfed by a cloud of Monarchs, their wings tickling her face, as they passed by.



Elegant Terns by Ed Henry

Through the club, she set out to change the culture on campus, which had increasingly sought to replace landscape with concrete. They began putting in native plants, slowly at first, but the project picked up steam as they gained administration support and funding through California Audubon grants. As they added more native and some non-native bird and butterfly friendly plants, they began to see the number of birds and butterflies on campus rise. "By 2018, it was apparent the Monarchs had found us in big numbers," she says. When they surveyed a plot planted entirely with native milkweed, they found that 46 Monarchs had emerged from that single plot. "People started calling me the bird lady or the butterfly lady," she beams. Wearing Monarch butterfly earrings and a large hummingbird necklace, it's clear these monikers are a matter of pride.

In 2019, she took a group of students from the club to the National Audubon convention in Milwaukee to present their research showing that birds were using the campus for migration once native plant habitat was provided to them. "People were blown away," she says. They wanted to know how she got so many kids involved, particularly since the students are predominantly from underserved and underrepresented communities. "Give them a project," she says. "Give them some say in what they want to do. Make them advocates." Hiring them for pay helps, too. "One thing I found is that by hiring them, I was not only giving them stake, I was giving them responsibility. They took that very seriously."

(Continued on next page)



(Continued from page 3)

One of the students who took the responsibility very seriously is Club President Karina Ornelas, who was one of the presenters at the National Audubon convention and now also works as a Restoration Assistant for San Diego Audubon. “Karina is such a rock star! She amazes me, what she gets done,” says Chaddock. I meet Ornelas at Otay Valley Regional Park where she shows me several areas she helped plant with native milkweed and a few other varieties of native plants as part of her restoration work for San Diego Audubon. After we visit her babies, as she refers to the fledgling plants, we talk about her experience birding, which she had never done prior to joining the college’s Audubon Club in 2018. Her first recorded bird observation was a Northern Parula, she tells me. I ask her to spell the name of the species because I’d never heard of it. Instead, she pulls the ID up on her phone and shows me a picture of a small, grayish-blue and yellow warbler. “I was so excited because it was my first time doing observations,” she says.



Northern Parula, Wikipedia Commons, Dan Pancamo

While growing up in Tijuana she had never really observed wild birds or paid much attention to them. Spending time doing research, however, has made her more aware. “Right now, I can hear different birds, so it has opened my ear more,” she says. “I really like it. They’ve given us some binoculars that I always carry with me. I also have the bird guide.” The mark of a true birder, she adds that she has attached sticky notes in her Sibley field guide, flagging all the birds that come to the school.

In July, Ornelas translated the *Local Birds of San Diego County* guide into Spanish through a grant for Latino Conservation Week. She also creates Spanish-language videos for San Diego Audubon’s Instagram account. In addition, she works with other multilingual students at City College to create videos and other informative materials about bird-friendly practices in a variety of languages, including Tagalog, Mandarin, Japanese, and Arabic. “We need to make everyone feel included and teach them more about how to help,” Ornelas says.

### Saving a Species

For Megan Flaherty, San Diego Audubon’s Conservation Manager, a lifelong love of animals led her to work a variety of jobs at the San Diego Zoo as a teenager and young adult, while also pursuing a degree in Ecology and Evolution from UCSD. She then went to Ireland to pursue her Master’s in conservation biology, completing her thesis work in Mozambique. Although all of her prior work at the zoo and even her master’s thesis focused on mammals, she says she developed an interest in birds while researching in Africa.

“There’s really no better place to fall in love with birds than Africa,” she says. “The diversity, the many types of species and habitats, the evolutionary adaptations for them to survive in different places. It’s incredible.” The first time she saw a Secretary Bird, she says she got so excited she nearly caused her classmate to crash their car. Another prized sighting was a Green-headed Oriole in the rainforest of Mozambique. She believes her excited recounting of these experiences may even have helped her land her first job as a part-time coordinator with San Diego Audubon. “I got the job, flew home, submitted my thesis, and started work the next day.”

That was six years ago, and since that time, Flaherty tells me she has become increasingly focused on one particular species of bird, the California Least Tern. Measuring a mere nine inches long, this small endangered tern spends its winters in Central and South America but migrates to nest on coastal sand dunes from Baja California up through San Francisco Bay from April to September. “Mission Bay is a really important area for them,” says Flaherty. “They have to have a certain number of secure nesting sites here in order for them to recover.”

She explains that the Least Terns nest directly on open sand using their webbed feet to make shallow scrapes before laying their eggs. The speckled, sand-colored eggs and chicks blend in with the dunes, making it difficult for predators to find them. “That has been their primary evolutionary adaptation for hundreds of thousands of years,” she says. It worked well for them until people started building along the California coastline and crowding onto the beaches during the summer. “They were impacted a lot by habitat loss and the destruction of eggs and chicks by human activity,” she says. After they were added to the Endangered Species List in 1970, their active nesting sites, including those in Mission Bay, were identified and protected.

The problem is the dunes they nest on in Mission Bay aren’t actually sand dunes. They’re more like dredge dunes, made up of nutrient-rich wetland material that was dredged up to create Mission Bay Park, the largest aquatic recreational area in the United States. The fertile soil invites a green blanket of invasive plants. “The sand-colored eggs and chicks would stand out like bullseyes,” Flaherty says. “They would get totally predated or they would choose not to nest there because it would be such a bad habitat.” That’s where habitat restoration comes into play. “What’s been really neat over the years is seeing how the sites have responded to really intensive removal of invasive species, introduction of native species, and lots of community outreach,” she says. “We now have in any given year—except during Covid—over a thousand people who will come out and help us restore the nesting sites.”

While the Least Tern populations began recovering from the 1970s to the mid 2000s, she says they are seeing a disturbing decline again despite the success of the habitat restoration work. “Biologists think it’s a combination of predator pressure as well as foraging issues,” she tells me. “They eat anchovy and other small forage fish, and climate change and our warming ocean is making that harder for them. We’ve been seeing larger die-off events where the chicks aren’t getting enough food and will die,” she says. “We’re really worried about it. Anytime there is a loss of adults, especially, or chicks or eggs or fledglings, it’s really bad, and we want to try to mitigate that as much as we can.”

To help mitigate predator pressure, San Diego Audubon’s Ternwatchers program trains volunteers to monitor the nesting sites and alert authorities when they see predators. The predators are then trapped and released in another location where they can’t threaten the Least Terns during the duration of the nesting season.

Flaherty also has been working with local fisheries to better manage the populations of anchovies and other forage fish the terns rely on for food. “I’ve seen how you can start out saying, ‘I’m going to restore this nesting area,’ but then before you know it, you’re also thinking about what are the other pressures that this species is feeling from predation, lack of food, just overall climate change, all the threats they have to deal with as they migrate from South America here and then back again,” she says. “You have to understand and navigate all of those areas in order to really make sure they’re going to be safe.”

For the past four nesting seasons, she also has been able to work as a biological monitor inside the nesting site. “Every time is really incredible,” she says. “The chicks are tiny—one- or two-inch-long tiny little fluffballs on toothpicks—tiny, skinny, little legs.” Flaherty has even learned to band the chicks. “That’s really scary because they’re really tiny, and you’re putting really tiny little bands on their really tiny little legs, making sure not to hurt them.”

I ask Flaherty what her favorite thing about the Least Terns is, and expecting her to say something about the chicks, she surprises me with her answer. “They do this thing called mobbing when they feel threatened,” she explains. They will fly directly at the threat, making alarm calls, and whatever they need to do to make the threat go away. When she’s inadvertently come too close to a nest, she says she’s had them divebomb her, peck at her, and poop on her—yes, intentionally pooping on a threat is a common



“Bruno” by Sandeep Dhar

defense mechanism. While she usually tries to avoid eye contact with them because she finds it makes them angrier, she says one time she accidentally made eye contact with one tern who was determined to teach her a lesson. “This tern had this look on its face, and it was so angry,” she says, scrunching up her face to imitate it. “It came right at me and pooped on me, but it was just so cute because it’s this tiny little bird looking so tough like, ‘I’m gonna get you!’” (See page 8 for Status Report: California Least Terns.)

### Capturing Awe

Something about angry little birds must

be endearing to people, I conclude, while having a conversation with birder and photographer Sandeep Dhar at the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve one morning. He, too, tells me about a tough little bird he and his family have grown to love. This one is an Allen’s Hummingbird that began visiting their backyard feeder almost four years ago. “We gave him the name Bruno because he’s very pugnacious and he’s always repelling any other birds that want to visit the feeder,” Dhar tells me. “He’s a real stocky bird. He likes to fluff his feathers and look all tough in the morning. He’s got this attitude, ‘This is my feeder! I’m the boss here!’” Dhar laughs.

He gives partial credit to Bruno for getting him interested in birding. He actually bought the hummingbird feeder after returning from a trip to Costa Rica in 2015 when he was neither a birder nor a photographer. While visiting the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve, Dhar tells me he was drawn to some hummingbird feeders hanging outside a small café at the entrance to the park. He noticed how most of the birds would respectfully take turns coming to the feeder. “Once in a while, a big bossy hummingbird, probably a Violet Sabrewing, would come and flush the other birds out,” he says. “Then they would gather on the side, and almost on cue, they would decide to come together and chase the Sabrewing away.” He says he spent the better part of two hours just watching those hummingbirds. “I can’t say that was the ‘Aha, this is what I’m going to do for the year onwards,’ but it was something that has stayed so deeply inside me that I have these clear visual memories of what I experienced that day,” Dhar says.

(Continued on next page)

## With Birds as Our Guides

Travis Kernitz, SDAS Executive Director

“From fins to feathers,” my dad declared when he heard the news I had accepted the job at San Diego Audubon Society, moving from an ocean-centric to a bird-centric position. Similarly, my new responsibilities, celebrating and protecting birds, resonated with family and friends in a way other achievements had not, enriching our relationships and reinforcing the importance of birds in our lives. Until that moment, I hadn’t seriously reflected on the role that birds had played in my own life until all the memories came tumbling out, one after another. Under my dad’s watch alone I was chased by and rescued from a giant goose (I was four); marveled at the lovingly detailed mallard he carved from wood; watched as his canaries hatched, and was allowed to help raise them. I recalled the cherished image of Cisco the parrot poised on his shoulder. And most recently, I remembered how proud he was that I accepted the role as Executive Director of San Diego Audubon.

Today, my view of the world is seen through a feathered lens. The canaries I helped raise as a child I now glimpse in every bird flying free across our landscape, which has become, figuratively, an increasingly dangerous “coal mine” (with a myriad of threats) for all of them. And their dwindling numbers and

muffled chorus tell us that they are in desperate need of our passion and care. It is our job, and our honor, to speak for and act for the benefit of birds, and simultaneously provide healthy, beautiful spaces for birding and exploring nature. We are ceaselessly looking to provide enriching experiences at Silverwood, Anstine-Audubon, and across the breadth of our county for our SDAS Friends—as well as all who care to “take a walk on the wild side.” We are working



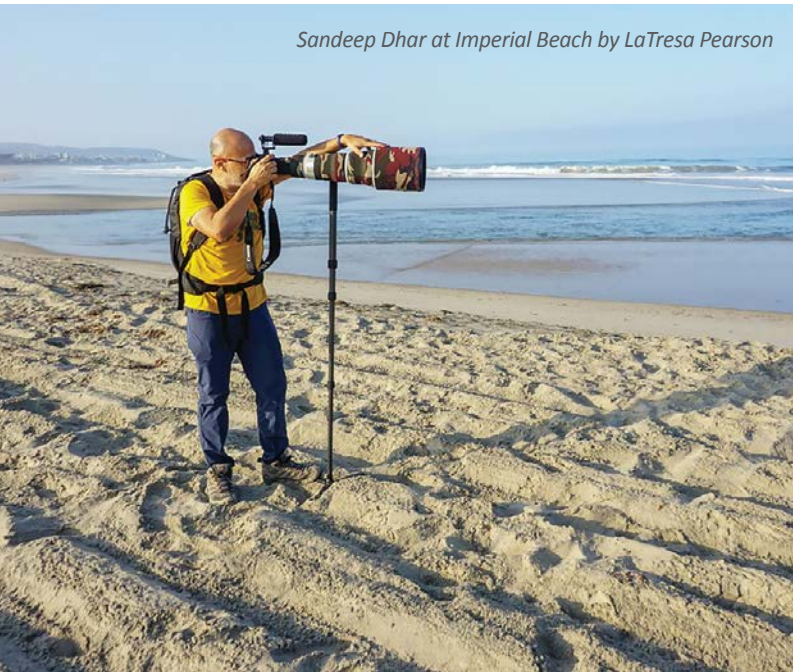
Snowy Egrets by Sandeep Dhar

hard to expand our reach and impact, so more habitat is preserved and drawn into the “rewild” vision. We are training a dedicated cadre of advocates to fight for policies and projects that are designed to maximize protections for nature while creating healthy outcomes for all—human, animal, and plant. The future is ripe for innovative solutions and the needs are great for rising leadership to make that happen.

With the birds as our guides, the work to be done is clear. You know how to reach me and I can’t wait to hear from you.



Sandeep Dhar at Imperial Beach by LaTresa Pearson



(Continued from page 5)

When he returned from Costa Rica and looked at the photos he'd taken of the hummingbirds, he was disappointed. "I really didn't want them because they didn't represent what I saw with my own eyes," he says. As a result, he not only got into birding, he set out to become a better photographer. He bought better camera equipment and began taking a lot of pictures. Bruno became one of his first subjects. "I must have taken a few thousand pictures of this hummingbird!" he says. "I was just fascinated, and to me, I felt like I could see the personality of this bird." He adds, "We like to say in our household that Bruno is family because this hummingbird has been with us for so many years, and we absolutely know who he is. We know every little detail of his gorget, of his beak, of his behavior. We have other hummingbirds come all the time, but we just know our hummingbird."

As we're talking, Dhar and I walk along the Seacoast Trail toward the mouth of the Tijuana River. The Pacific Ocean is to our right and the salt marsh is to our left. "The sun is going to peek out from there," he says pointing across the marsh. "It's going to be an absolutely gorgeous morning. I just love this area. Let's stay quiet for a minute." We stand silently and soak in the beauty as the sun begins to rise over the horizon. "I can't believe what an amazing sunrise I'm looking at! I just can't believe I'm here looking at this beautiful light, and there's the sound of birds in the distance and the sound of waves. There's so much to be grateful for. It's an absolutely beautiful place."

Although Dhar lives in Scripps Ranch, he is drawn to Imperial Beach and the Tijuana River Estuary, he says. "I don't see the difference between birds, birding, and the place. The place is so important. What I'd like to be is a visual storyteller. I'd like to connect the animal with the place, with its habitat. I'd like to tell stories to people about why this place is so special." One way he has used his photographs to help tell a story is through *King Tides: The Future is Now*, a collaborative photography project designed to increase awareness about the effects of climate change in San Diego. Dhar says he's been coming here for the past few years to take pictures during king tide events. "Then I say, 'Okay, what am I observing here?' Am I able to make the direct connection between that king tide event and the impact it's making on birds?" He says that birding and photography have become a way he contributes to conservation. "If I was not

into birding, then possibly, I wouldn't be taking these pictures and making this effort," he says. "I have started caring very deeply."

### Sharing the Joy—and the Data

When Dhar first started getting into birding, he says one of the ways he learned about the birds in the area was by joining San Diego Audubon's bird walks led by longtime Field Guide Chair, Peter Thomas. When I meet Thomas at the Rios Avenue entrance to the San Elijo Lagoon, he tells me he has been Field Guide Chair at San Diego Audubon for about ten years and half jokes that he's eager for a successor. Nevertheless, he loves taking people on bird walks. "If I can introduce people to birds, and they like it, then maybe they'll also be interested in the rest of nature," he says. "And maybe if they see nature and enjoy it—it has to be fun—maybe then they'll become more loving of it. And if they love it, maybe they'll vote to protect it."

To engage people on his bird walks, Thomas says he tells stories. "There are so many fascinating aspects to birding," he says. "It is behavior. It is how they make their living. What happens with migration. Migration is fascinating," he continues. "Some of these birds in a single year will travel over 20,000 miles! Arctic Terns go all the way across Europe and then across Africa, then cross the Atlantic again to South America, and then they turn around and do the same thing back."

Thomas puts on his field guide hat as we pass through a tunnel that opens out to a view of the lagoon where a large group of seabirds and a few shorebirds have gathered. "When we came in, we heard all that screeching. What do you think that might have been?" he asks me. "Terns?" I respond, carefully avoiding specificity. "Yes! Good! Excellent! It was very loud. It was continuous. It wasn't just a single call. It was a prolonged one, which usually goes along with the Elegant Tern," he tells me. "Just by the sound of it, Elegant Terns are what they're likely to be en masse like that." He goes on to tell me about the breeding collapse of the Elegant Terns on Isla Rasa in the Gulf of California, as well as spelling out some of the differences between Elegant, Royal, and Caspian Terns. "Caspian are big thugs," he says. "They're sort of the stevedores of the tern groups. Big, heavy red bill and kind of a marine haircut."

Thomas tells me he grew up around birds. An aunt who lived in his extended family home had a small aviary off their breakfast room, and his mother used to put out seed for wild birds, but it was a trip he took with his wife to South Texas that got them both into birding. They saw a sign advertising boat trips to see the Whooping Cranes and decided to sign up. "I think there were perhaps 37 cranes left, and I think on this little boat trip, we saw 32 of the 37."

Thomas says he really got serious about birding after he retired from practicing medicine. He and his wife have since taken birding trips to 22 countries, beginning with an Audubon trip to Panama about 15 years ago where they stayed in an old U.S. radar tower overlooking the Canal. "It was a world opening up," he says. They would get up early in the morning and climb to the top of the tower, which overlooked the tree canopy. They could look down and watch all the birds coming in, as well as howler monkeys and spider monkeys.

In addition to leading bird walks and going on birding trips, Thomas has become a serious contributor to iNaturalist. He enjoys taking photos and submitting them, and he likes the citizen science component. "There are wonderful examples of why it really does work for citizen science," he says. "I've had inquiries from people about things I've photographed that have turned out to actually be species previously unrecorded in areas, and in at least one case, something that might even have been a new species." And then there's the competitive aspect. "I think I'm number 67 in the world in terms of contributions," he says. "Birders are pretty competitive

people. There are always some people who say, I don't want to make a list. I just want to look at birds, but they're a tiny minority."

Robert Nickel is one of those birders who likes to make lists. I meet Robert and his wife Michelle at Robb Field for a morning of birding at the San Diego River. Dressed in a floppy hat and a T-shirt with a large cartoon image of a bird and the words, "Bird Nerd," emblazoned across the front, Robert is hard to miss. The shirt, he tells me, is a gift from his mother, who bought it for him to wear while delivering his annual bird talk at Stanford University's Sierra Family Camp on the south shore of Lake Tahoe. "They have an event where anybody can get up and give a 10-minute talk about anything they're passionate about," says Robert. "So, I did a talk about birds, and people got such a kick out of it it's become this annual thing."

Robert hasn't always been passionate about birding. When he was growing up, his mom liked to go birdwatching, but he wouldn't join her because he thought it was "ridiculous and nerdy." Then one night, he rented *The Big Year* starring Steve Martin, Jack Black, and Owen Wilson competing against each other to see who could see the most bird species in a single year. "After I watched *The Big Year*, I said to my mom, hey, let's go try this, and we went to the San Joaquin Wildlife Sanctuary, and that was it." He's been hooked ever since. It took Michelle a little longer to fall under the birding spell, but once she was in, she was all in.

Birding with Robert and Michelle is a hoot. As we walk along the river, they're able to keep a conversation going with me, while bantering back and forth about which species of birds they're seeing and how many of each there are, so they can enter the data into

## A Teachable Moment *Sparking Small Connections to Last a Lifetime*

by Haley Heiner, Education Manager

With no shortage of wildlife here in San Diego, we in education often express gratitude for our focus on birds. Imagine a mission centered around mountain lions, conversations with school partners would be very different! Not only do we have safety on our side, we have this wonderful bonus of knowing every student we encounter already has some previous experience with birds. Whether it be a seagull patrolling their tables during lunch or songbirds singing outside their windows, birds are the ultimate accessible wildlife even in urbanized areas. Thinking about education in the early years, it's all about making connections to what students know. While brand new information and experiences are always great, we know how important it is to introduce content relevant to their lives. To allow them to build connections to new information by accessing prior knowledge creates deeper understanding because it is relevant to lived experiences. And lucky for us, although native plants and biodiversity may not initially be part of our student's vocabulary, we can pretty much guarantee they've tossed around the words bird, feather, and beak and can use this knowledge as a gateway into the understanding of our greater natural world.

Now the big question becomes, how do we help students bridge the gap from having seen birds before to feeling a connection with them? It's all about sparking a sense of wonder and excitement and so far, the best way to do this seems to be via binoculars. For those of you who have done it, there is something special about handing someone their first pair of binoculars. Maybe it's the idea that they allow you to look at something

their eBird accounts. I ask them why they like to use eBird. "I like to look back each year and see how my year was," says Robert. He explains how this yearly review revealed that he'd gotten at least 100 birds every year since he started birding. Three or four years ago, he discovered he was in serious danger of breaking his streak when he noticed he was 17 birds short for the year and it was already late December. On a trip up to Northern California, they went birding every day. He got his 100th bird, a Common Loon, in Morro Bay. "We had a little celebration right there," he says, adding "So, I enter the data because it's fun, but if you do your fun hobby and put the data in, guess what? Real scientists are going to look at it."

In addition to sharing the data he gathers, Robert enjoys sharing his passion for birding. At the bird talk he does every year at Sierra Family Camp, he gets 60 to 80 attendees in a normal year. He and Michelle were especially excited to see a group of teenagers join his talk this year. Michelle tells me one of the boys even asked Robert to sign his skateboard for him after the talk. "He had Matthew Gray Gubler's signature (one of the stars of the TV series *Criminal Minds*, who attends the camp), and then there's Robert Nickel, the birding guy," she says with pride. "It was pretty cool," adds Robert. "It had such a profound impact on the entire rest of his week because every place he went, suddenly he was more aware." Every talk ends with Robert's open invitation to join him the following morning at the flagpole for a 7:30 a.m. bird walk. He tells me that even though he's competitive and likes to record the number of birds he sees on a walk, he also just enjoys getting out and being in nature. "You're out in nature, and that's what birding is," he says. "It's a way of connecting."

you could've seen a million times in a completely new way and with total clarity. Or maybe it's the insane magnification. Either way, the consensus seems to be, binoculars are kind of the coolest thing ever. When binoculars are introduced to students, the initial passing out is hectic. We tend to have some funny conversations: binoculars down while walking, don't use them to look at your friends. Important conversations: what that knob on the top does, what to do if you wear glasses. And the seemingly obvious: don't look at the sun which almost always inevitably results in someone looking directly at the sun. But after a little bit of chaos, a moment of quiet settles in. Students start making their own adjustments, and having the lenses up to their eyes quiets the talking. We hand out field guides and watch as they flip back and forth in awe, finding birds they have seen before, pointing out ones with funny feathers, and marveling at how many different types live across the county. Now the potential for conversation and access to new knowledge is limitless. Conversations

about food chains and energy transfers emerge. Climate change and migration become easy connections to make. Students start learning to slow down and look carefully at the world around them, understanding their connection and proximity with nature which we hope will hold long after the binoculars go down. So, with all the stressors our young students continue to experience, we get excited when we can break out the binoculars and get back to the school yard this fall. That unique moment of quiet and the connection with nature that birds offer might just be what we all need.

Photo by Lisa Cox of USFWS





# Status Report: California Least Tern

by Megan Flaherty, Conservation Manager

## Population and Nesting Sites:

- Date of Endangered Species Listing: June 2nd, 1970
- Population in 1971: **256 nesting pairs**
- Population at height of recovery in 2009: **~7,100 nesting pairs**
- Population now: **~3,500 nesting pairs**
- Nesting in San Diego County accounts for **60%** of the California population
- Number of nesting sites in San Diego County: **18-20**
- Average number of fledglings produced in Mission Bay on an annual basis for the last 20 years: **120 fledglings**
- Mission Bay covers **4,235 acres**, including park, open water, and everything in between. The tern sites account for just **22 acres, or 0.05%**
- An estimated **15 million people** visit Mission Bay Park every year



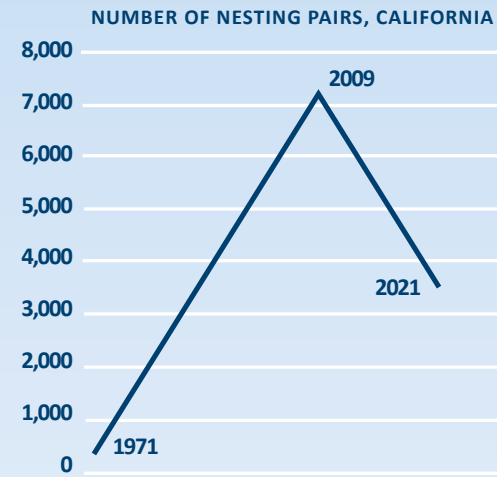
## Key Species Facts:

- Average weight of a newly hatched chick: **6-7 grams**
- Average weight of an adult bird: **45-55 grams**
- Oldest known bird: 24 years, recovered in San Diego
- Number of eggs per nest: 1-4, but **1-2** is most usual
- Average incubation time: **28 days**
- After hatching, chicks become mobile within **three days** and can typically fly after a month

- Favorite food: Anchovy, Topsmelt, Silversides
- Typical foraging range: **1.2 km**, but up to **3 km** if food is scarce. Foraging farther away leaves the eggs and chicks more exposed to predators
- Top three predators: Peregrine Falcon, Corvids (crows and ravens), Great Blue Herons



by Sandeep Dhar



## Habitat Protection and Restoration:

- Hours logged by Ternwatchers in a typical breeding season to monitor predator activity: **350 hours**
- Pounds of vegetation removed by restoration volunteers on an annual basis: **25,000 lbs.**
- We're creating a **Long-term Management Plan** in partnership with the City of San Diego to ensure that the terns can withstand impacts from sea-level rise, climate change, and human disturbance.



by Cheryl Old



by Kevin Clark



SDG&E at work

## Climate Change–Driven Sea Level Rise in San Diego:

Sea levels rose 0.71 feet in San Diego during the 20th century. By the end of the 21st century, San Diego could experience another **3.6 to 10.2 feet of sea level rise**. Coastal storms are projected to occur more frequently in the future, which will further exacerbate flooding along the coast.

From 1906 to 2017, the tide gauge at San Diego suggests a rise of around 2.17 mm per year (about 0.09 inches), around **32% higher than the global rate**.

Extreme flood frequency is expected to increase under all projections. Conservation areas could experience complete loss of viable habitat if exposed to chronic flooding.

California **Least Terns may become locally extirpated** if habitats that the species relies on are seriously impacted or even vanish, including the coastal dunes where they nest and the wetlands and eelgrass beds where they forage for fish.

Torrey Pines Beach at king tide, a harbinger of things to come. By Bill Everts

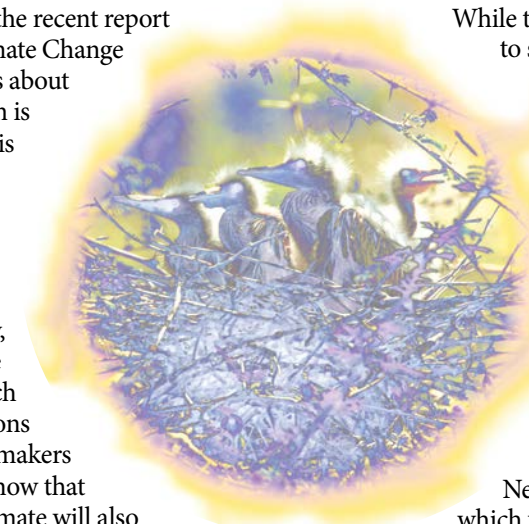


# Climate Action: Urgent

## Newest IPCC Report Highlights the Need for All Hands on Deck for Climate Action

by Megan Flaherty, Conservation Manager

By now, most people have heard about the recent report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which includes dire predictions about our planet's future if more serious action is not taken to combat climate change. This is the first report released by the panel in over seven years, and its findings are sobering. In that time, nations have continued to miss the mark in moving away from fossil fuels, and scientists agree that regardless of what we do now, we have already "locked in" a 1.5 degree C rise in global temperatures. How much we will exceed that depends on the actions of our federal, state, and local decision-makers in the months and years to come. We know that these dramatic changes to the global climate will also impact bird populations; National Audubon's *Survival by Degrees* report explored the impacts of various climate scenarios on nearly 400 species, and as many as two-thirds of North American birds will face increasing risks of extinction.



While this news is bleak, it is more important than ever to stay hopeful and engaged, and to dig deeper in our efforts to advocate for and protect our wildlife, communities, and natural spaces from the impacts of a changing climate. San Diego Audubon and our partners are at the forefront of this fight locally, pushing the City to quantify, value, and expand natural carbon sinks such as coastal wetlands, commenting on clean energy projects to ensure that impacts to birds are mitigated as much as possible; educating students and community members about the connections between climate, sustainability, and ecological health; and more.

Next March, the IPCC will unveil another report, which will detail potential routes to minimize, mitigate, and prevent the worst climate outcomes. We are hopeful that leaders around the world will take its recommendations to heart, and we are ready to fight for local action here at home. For more, visit [www.audubon.org/climate/survivalbydegrees](http://www.audubon.org/climate/survivalbydegrees)

## Anstine Ambles The Benefit of Native Plants for Wildlife

by Anthony Isham, SDAS Climate Corps Fellow



by Anthony Isham

For the past two months, I have had the pleasure of working with the San Diego Audubon Society as a Climate Action Corps Fellow. This fellowship has allowed individuals from all over the state to gain experience as climate change professionals. My primary responsibilities during this time have been wildfire risk mitigation at both the Silverwood Wildlife Sanctuary and the Anstine-Audubon Nature Preserve, as well as helping to kickstart the Native Seed Library project.

Both projects are very important for climate change adaptation and promoting resiliency within San Diego's native ecosystems.

As California summers become hotter and drier it is important to adapt to these changes. The past couple of years have already seen devastating wildfires. We're trying to protect our preserves by thinning out overgrown vegetation and creating better fire breaks. This also allows the remaining vegetation to increase in size, making it more resistant to low-intensity fires. The San Diego Audubon Society's preserves serve the public by teaching visitors about local biodiversity and providing necessary habitats for a variety of birds and other wildlife.

The two nature preserves have also been important locations for seed collections. In August, a member of the California Native Plant Society visited the Anstine-Audubon Nature Preserve to share his knowledge on seed collection and processing. With his help, we were

able to harvest seeds from five plants that will be used in our Native Seed Libraries. By the end of my fellowship, there will be a new seed library established at the Anstine-Audubon Nature Preserve. Visitors to the preserve will be able to take these seeds with them and grow their native plants at home.

There are many advantages to growing native plants in your yard. The first would be a decrease in water consumption. Since these plants are already adapted to the semi-arid climate of California, they don't need nearly as much water as non-native ornamentals. After the first year of becoming established the plants will require minimal care and maintenance. Anyone who isn't as experienced with horticulture should be able to grow them. It could even be a great project to do as a family.

Aside from saving water, there are many other ecological benefits to having these plants around. Many native plants are critical for our myriad pollinators, including a few bats, tens of birds, and hundreds of insects—and attract hummingbirds, butterflies, to your garden. Native plants also provide habitat for local and migratory birds. Since San Diego is on a migratory flyway, birds need havens to rest and eat along their routes. As most natural habitats have been lost to development and urbanization, we hope that the Native Seed Libraries can help bring back some of these important spaces. Borrowing seeds from our libraries is like taking home a small piece of our nature preserves. It has a direct impact on California's natural environment and is fun to do. If you are interested in starting your own, finding one of the already established libraries, or simply learning more about native plants be sure to check the "Conservation" page on the San Diego Audubon Society website. Let's continue supporting California's wonderful biodiversity!

*Anstine* is open to the public on Saturdays from 9am-12pm, and is open to our SDAS Friends on the third Wednesday of the month from 8am-11am. Pre-registration is required at [www.sandiegoaudubon.org/what-we-do/anstine](http://www.sandiegoaudubon.org/what-we-do/anstine)



# Silverwood Scene *From Spring Blooms to Summer Fledglings*

by Phillip Lambert, Silverwood Resident Manager

During the bustling, burgeoning spring months of this year, the wildflower blooms were a source of encouragement as well as beauty. Despite only 9.75 inches of precipitation, Silverwood's wildflower bloom was profuse. Though the stream beds were mostly dry and devoid of the flowering annuals that normally line their banks, there were plenty of annuals, adapted to drier conditions, that bloomed on the sunny, open slopes. These included the Rough Popcorn flower (*Plagiobothrys collinus* var. *fulvescens*), Delicate/Campo Clarkia (*Clarkia delicata*), Nuttall's Snapdragon (*Antirrhinum nuttallianum* ssp. *nuttallianum*), Chinese Houses (*Collinsia heterophylla* var. *heterophylla*), Parry's Larkspur (*Delphinium parryi* ssp. *parryi*), Scarlet Larkspur (*Delphinium cardinal*), Canchalagua (*Zeltnera venusta*), and White Pincushion (*Chaenactis artemisiifolia*), and Yellow Pincushion (*Chaenactis glabriuscula* var. *glabriuscula*).

Silverwood's wildlife breeding and nesting season also ended with exciting results for many species. Ash, our migratory Ash-throated flycatcher (as reported in the June/July *Sketches*) courted and bred with a new mate after his long-time mate Ashley failed to appear. They successfully nested on May 4th, and on June 24th four fledglings left the box. Ash continued feeding the four with mealworms daily through the end of July. His new mate was rarely seen after the fledglings left the box. Beginning in July she returned and began mimicking the fledglings with her beak open begging to be fed, but quickly caught on to the daily mealworm treat. By August Ash, his new mate, and all the fledglings had left Silverwood for their migration to some unknown, eight-month wintering destination to the south.

In May, a new pair of resident Western Bluebirds produced their first clutch of four and soon after started a second clutch. They began feeding the second clutch of hatchlings in their box during mid-June and well into July. The male Western Screech Owl, who daily roosts in plain sight, has become an attraction for many photographers and the general public. A

single owlet has been sighted in the pair's oak hollow nest.

This season two pairs of Phainopeplas occupied the observation area. By June, the crop of Elderberries and Red Berries (*Ramnus pilosa*) provided the evident reason they chose the site for raising their young this year. Many family groups of Lawrence's Goldfinches spent the days feeding on the dense populations of Popcorn Flower species in and around the observation area.

On June 13th the sanctuary's popular female Mule Deer, "Momma," introduced this season's twin fawns with a drink at the bird baths. They are now regularly seen wandering through the observation area. The local Striped Skunk has been raising three kits, and though the resident female Raccoon has not revealed her cubs, there are plenty of little tracks around the observation area.



Phil Lambert mesmerizes home school students on a Silverwood trail.

With the partial lifting of COVID restrictions, the human scene at Silverwood was equally active. During April, we conducted the first two on-site nature education events with home school students since the closure of Silverwood back in May of 2020. These events included exploring the ethnobotany of the chaparral, which taught students the Kumeyaay's diverse uses for native plants, in addition to exploring some of Silverwood's geologic wonders.

Volunteer efforts helped considerably with many of the on-site projects and duties. So far this year 18 volunteer hosts have put in 246 hours on Sunday mornings greeting guests at the parking lot and helping to identify bird species for visitors in the observation area. Eight other volunteers spent 105 hours on projects such as invasive weed removal, trail clearing, thinning shrubs, and hauling bundles of cuttings off for fire clearance. Mary Parks, a woman from Florida, met up with her two daughters, Olivia Pavlov from Texas and Loris from Illinois for a San Diego vacation. They spent three days of their one week stay volunteering on fire clearance projects here at Silverwood.

## Silverwood Calendar for October– December 2021

Silverwood Wildlife Sanctuary in Lakeside is free and open to the public on Sundays from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. **Registration required.** To sign up for a visit RSVP at [www.sandiegoaudubon.org/what-we-do/silverwood](http://www.sandiegoaudubon.org/what-we-do/silverwood). Please note that COVID-19 safety rules are in place during your visit and should be followed at all times.

Silverwood is also open on Wednesdays, 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. for *SDAS Friends members only*. Please call a week in advance of the day of your visit at (619) 443-2998. See our web page for all updates.

**Wish list:** Silverwood is requesting funding support for a Thermo-Gel Homeowner Protection Kit. Thermo-Gel is a water gelling agent that aids water in structure protection, fire suppression and retardation. The last kit was funded 13 years ago and the shelf life has since expired. \$523 is needed for a new kit.

# San Diego Bird Festival 2022

*Birds of ALL feathers, come flock together!*

We are excited to announce the 2022 San Diego Bird Festival, to be presented **February 16-20, 2022**. We are returning to our live and in-person format, and we are inviting birds of all feathers to come flock together! We'll have guest speakers from the world of birding, field trips to every corner of the county, and opportunities to see the birders we have missed during the pandemic.

## So Many Ways to Bird!

Birding is for everybody, including you. We have birding excursions for all ages and abilities. Bird *your* way with us.

**Full-day Trips**, including **Birding the Border** and **Big Day Half-day Trips** that meet in the field

**Birding by Kayak** with Ocean Connectors

**Birding by Bike** with Hannah and Erik Go Birding!

**Birdability**—trips for people with access challenges. We'll be assessing all of our field trip sites for accessibility to help you better determine what is right for you.

**Birding by Ear** with Hank Ingersoll

**Pelagic Trips** with Swarovski Optik

**Birding with a Camera** and photography programs

And more free trips than ever before!

## Workshops and Lectures

We are expanding our menu of workshops and lectures, offering half-day intensive workshops each morning and lectures in the afternoon. Some of the topics covered:

How to bring **Accessible Programs** to your Local Birding Club

A two-session **Bird Drawing Workshop** led by David Stump

**What is a Catio?** Giving cats some outdoor freedom while keeping birds safe

**Shade-grown Coffee** and all its bird-friendly benefits

**Naturescaping** your yard with native plants

**Native Seed Libraries**—A rapidly growing grassroots movement

**How to Digiscope**...and more!

## Guest Keynote Speakers

Tammah Watts—Author of *Keep Looking Up*, and a San Diego local

Freya McGregor and Virginia Rose from Birdability

Tiffany Kersten—Big Year birder and field safety activist

Kevin Karlson—Author of beloved field guides and birding references including *Gulls Simplified*

## Eat with Us!

Join us for coffee and pastries before the field trips depart

Full-day bus trips include sack lunches. The boat we use for the pelagic trip has a galley where you can purchase lunch or a snack.

Enjoy a post-birding beer at the **Vortex Optics Uncommon Saloon** or catch dinner in the **Bird Feeder Cafe**.

## Exhibit Hall

Check out the bird tallyboard to see which birds were seen during the festival. Visit with our sponsors and see the latest and greatest

## Sketches has Gained Some Weight...

Four additional pages and a fraction of an ounce, to be precise. We have contemplated going to a 12-page, quarterly publication for some time and are now taking it live. Our theme for this issue, *Birding as a Worldview*, seemed appropriately ambitious as we look to give more substance and stature to our venerable newsletter. We are increasing our use of electronic



Marbled Godwits by David (Ranger Dave) Hekel.

in optics and gear. We've already spoken with many of our usual sponsors. You can count on seeing some of your favorite people from the birding business: **Swarovski Optik**, **Carl Zeiss Sport Optics**, **Kowa**, **Leica**, **Vortex**, and more. **Redstart Birding** will be here as our optics retailer. Hang out! Share stories. Kick back.

Registration fee is just \$30, which includes coffee and pastries before field trips and access to the Uncommon Saloon. Program-specific costs apply.

## Post-Festival Trips

Back by popular demand, it's our **Baja California Excursion!** This trip takes you the entire length of the Baja Peninsula to see beautiful landscapes, whales, and of course, birds. Offered through **Holbrook Travel**. Festival registration is not required.

How can you visit San Diego and resist birding all of the habitats you can? Consider **Birding with a Camera in Southern California** with Krisztina Scheeff. This 4-day, 3-night post-festival trip gives you time to explore the desert and mountain areas that are slightly too far away for a day trip. Festival registration is not required.

You can find out more about all of these programs at [www.sandiegoaudubon.org](http://www.sandiegoaudubon.org). Bird Festival information can be found under the "Birding" tab.

**Registration begins November 11, 2021.** Friends of San Diego Audubon will receive an invitation to register early.

communications (website, e-newsletter, and social media) to provide details and dates for all birding trips, other calendar events, and programmatic opportunities for our readers, and commit *Sketches* to digging a little deeper into the challenges and opportunities we face as one of the region's strongest conservation advocates. We will be highlighting the climate crisis and our efforts to support diversity, both biological and social. We look forward to hearing your thoughts. Thanks for reading!