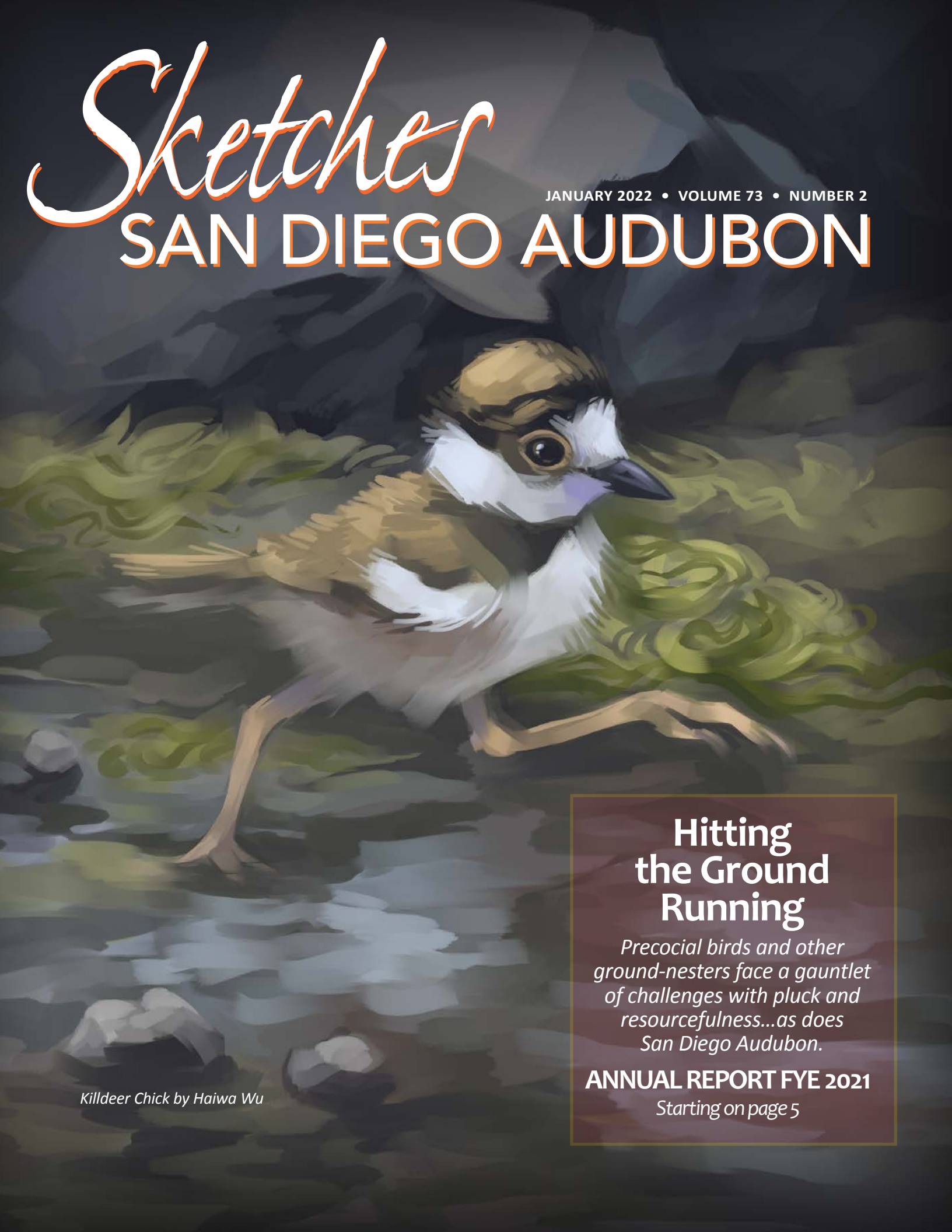


# Sketches

JANUARY 2022 • VOLUME 73 • NUMBER 2

# SAN DIEGO AUDUBON



*Killdeer Chick by Haiwa Wu*

## Hitting the Ground Running

*Precocial birds and other ground-nesters face a gauntlet of challenges with pluck and resourcefulness...as does San Diego Audubon.*

**ANNUAL REPORT FYE 2021**

*Starting on page 5*

# Burrowing Owls

## Once again flying free on the Ramona Grasslands

by Trish Jones-Mondero, San Diego Habitat Conservancy Board Member



### Precocial vs. Altricial The gauntlet from egg to fledgling

The Burrowing Owl, like most owls, is **semi-altricial**, meaning its chicks hatch with eyes closed, have little or no down, and are unable to care for or protect themselves. The squirrel burrows their parents nest in serve as the only refuge the chicks have for the first 2–3 weeks of their lives. Hawks and eagles are also in this category, and will usually build exposed nests in trees or on cliff ledges. Fully **altricial** birds, who's chicks are totally helpless, almost always build hidden nests well above the ground in trees or shrubs, or use nesting holes in tree trunks. Passerines are altricial.

**Precocial** birds, as the name implies, raise chicks that are ready to walk or run within hours of hatching, and will break out of the egg with eyes open, covered with camouflaged down, and are able to feed themselves. The Galliformes (such as pheasants, grouse, and quail) are characteristic of this group, as are ducks and geese. They imprint on their attentive parents and trail them closely. The California Quail is precocial.

**Semi-precocial** species hatch with eyes open, are covered with down, and are capable of leaving the nest soon after hatching (they can walk and often swim). They stay at the nest (which is generally minimal, exposed, and on the ground or in a hole). This developmental pattern is found in the young of gulls, terns, and shore birds such as plovers. The California Least Tern is semi-precocial. Water birds such as grebes and loons require somewhat more care but are still ranked as semi-precocial.

The survival strategies of all birds depend on successfully fledging a large enough percentage of their young to increase or at least sustain their populations. When habitat loss, climate change, or other factors severely limit their ability to do so (as with our Burrowing Owls) intervention is needed to avoid local extirpation.

San Diego County is welcoming a new population of Western Burrowing Owls (*Athene cunicularia hypugaea*). Thanks to the coordinated efforts of multiple organizations, two dozen owls were translocated to the Ramona Grasslands Conservation Bank, which is managed by the San Diego Habitat Conservancy (SDHC). The San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance (SDZWA), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, and SDHC teamed up to help give the small, charismatic bird a chance to rebound and continue to be a key part of San Diego County's rich biodiversity.

The Western Burrowing Owl, a subspecies of Burrowing Owl restricted to the western U.S., was once widespread and abundant in San Diego County. According to the *San Diego County Bird Atlas*, the number of occupied sites had declined steadily by the 1970s. It is estimated that nearly all resident coastal populations were uprooted by 1997 due to intensive urban development and habitat fragmentation. "The owls have been on a collision course with development for the last few decades, so there is the potential for the species to decline very rapidly after they hit a certain tipping point," says Colleen Wisinski, a SDZWA conservation program manager and the Burrowing Owl translocation field team leader.



Owl release at entrance to artificial burrow, by SDZWA.

Based on SDZWA surveys in 2015, the Burrowing Owl population in San Diego County was reduced to a single breeding population, called a node, in the Otay Mesa region just north of the international border. Habitat loss, invasive vegetation spread, pesticides, and the elimination of ground squirrels have drastically reduced their numbers. If no mitigation and conservation measures had been employed, this could have led to the complete loss of breeding Burrowing Owls in coastal San Diego County.

Approximately 30 miles inland from the City of San Diego, the 210-acre Ramona Grasslands Conservation Bank is situated in the western portion of the Santa Maria Valley near the town of Ramona. The area is characterized by expansive native grasslands—almost unique within San Diego County—and dotted with oak woodlands and chaparral. Kathleen Pollett, SDHC's senior conservation habitat manager, visits the reserve regularly to check on the owls. As she scans the area, Pollett explains, "This project is part of the Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Program, one of the first of its kind in the country."

In February 2021, Wisinski's team translocated 24 Burrowing Owls from SDZWA's Breeding Program to the Bank. Prior to the translocation,



SDZWA and SDHC installed 26 artificial burrows and 12 acclimatization aviaries (large enclosures). They installed the enclosures over the artificial burrows and kept them in place for three to four weeks to allow the owls to breed and stay onsite. In addition, they employed conspecific cues or social information to indicate the presence of Burrowing Owls. They played acoustic call playbacks of the owls' vocalizations, including cooing, warbling, rasping, and clucking to increase the likelihood that owls would stay.

While the future now looks brighter, long-term management continues to be essential to the Burrowing Owl's sustainable

the establishment of this new breeding node. "Once we have a breeding node established on the San Diego Habitat Conservancy site, there is a high likelihood the birds will expand into the adjacent Grasslands Preserve," says landscape ecologist Christina Schaefer, an SDHC board member who is part of the team that monitors the translocated owls.

Burrowing Owls generally rely on fossorial (burrowing) mammals such as ground squirrels to create burrows in which the owls ultimately breed. In San Diego County and other parts of the West, California Ground Squirrels are the ecosystem engineers that modify the environment—creating a direct and critical correlation between California Ground Squirrel and Burrowing Owl. "The endgame would be to have a self-sustaining system where you've got ground squirrels making homes—not just us digging holes for them," says Susan Wynn, a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

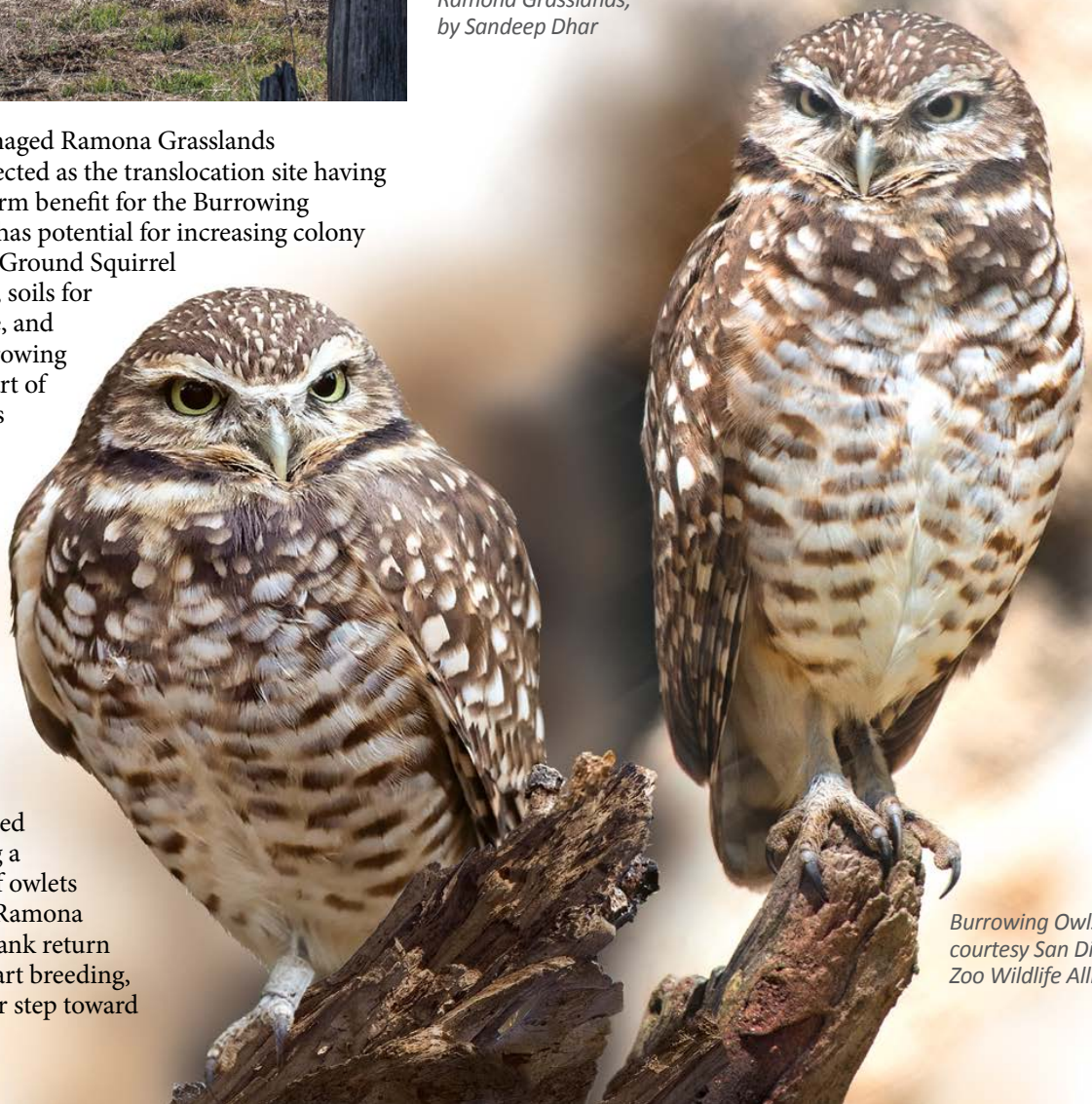
Along with the reintroduction and management of the California Ground Squirrel, vegetation management plays an important role. The detailed land management of plant life provided by SDHC is vital to retain the Burrowing Owls and their squirrel ecosystem engineers. For example, dense ground cover and high vegetation may reduce the ability of the squirrels to detect predators and may also impede their foraging and burrow-digging activities. The owls avoid dense and tall grasslands so they can more clearly seek out prey. To provide breeding habitat for the owls,

*(Continued on page 4)*

*Habitat restoration at Ramona Grasslands, by Sandeep Dhar*

endurance. The SDHC-managed Ramona Grasslands Conservation Bank was selected as the translocation site having the most promising long-term benefit for the Burrowing Owl. Specifically, the Bank has potential for increasing colony numbers for the California Ground Squirrel (*Otospermophilus beecheyi*), soils for burrowing, prey abundance, and connectivity to nearby Burrowing Owl habitat. The Bank is part of a mosaic of conserved lands associated with the 3,500-acre Ramona Grasslands Preserve, which provides plenty of suitable burrowing habitat for the owls to spread out.

Burrowing Owls naturally form clans if the habitat supports it. They have a strong homing instinct and tend to return to their place of birth to breed. The latter is considered an advantage when creating a new breeding population. If owlets hatched and fledged at the Ramona Grasslands Conservation Bank return after winter migration to start breeding, it will be considered a major step toward



*Burrowing Owls, courtesy San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance*



(Continued from page 3)

SDHC employs grazing, mowing, line trimming, and restoration of lands overrun with invasive grasses and annuals to create healthy habitat that supports native grasses and flowering herbs. “San Diego Habitat Conservancy’s purpose is to have areas of important habitat set aside that they maintain for native species,” says Wisinski. “Without them, we couldn’t do what we do to focus on the animals themselves. Having organizations that focus on the habitat is a key piece of the puzzle.”

A habitat that is both suitable and sustainable includes ridding it from toxins created both by humankind and by other species. Burrowing Owls’ diets consist of small mammals, insects, amphibians, reptiles, and even other birds. Eating small mammals that have ingested toxins, for example, appears to have contributed to the Burrowing Owl’s decline. Anticoagulant rodenticide exposure and toxicosis have been documented in dead and dying Burrowing Owls taken to the Pesticide & Disease Investigations Wildlife Health Laboratory at the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. To avoid unnecessary mortality, SDHC plans to provide additional education, including warnings about the use of rodenticides in and around the Ramona Grasslands Conservation Bank.

Looking beyond the expansive grasslands and reflecting on the early success, Don Scoles, Executive Director of SDHC says, “I look forward to continuing our important work here at the Ramona Grasslands and in other parts of San Diego County. The land management and preservation work we do play such an integral part in ensuring that our and future generations can appreciate and even marvel at a creature such as this vulnerable

little owl.” If you would like to learn more about the Burrowing Owl reintroduction program, go to [www.sdhabitat.org](http://www.sdhabitat.org) or call (619) 365-4839.



To further improve ground squirrel habitat and to promote ground squirrel recruitment and retention, they are also installing brush piles, which are placed approximately 50 yards apart to increase ground squirrel occupancy. In addition, funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service is being used to fell approximately four acres of diseased eucalyptus trees to reduce predation from raptors, such as Great Horned Owls (*Bubo virginianus*). Additional time has been spent chipping excessive brush to reduce habitat for other species that may prey on the Burrowing Owl colonies, such the Long-tailed Weasel (*Neogale frenata*).

Burrowing owls are a unique and vital part of California’s natural history. Over the coming months and years, the alliance will continue to implement its long-term management plan, as well as work with volunteer organizations such as the San Diego Audubon Society. In November 2021, SDAS volunteers assisted with these efforts, including construction of new brush piles and removal of invasive plant species.



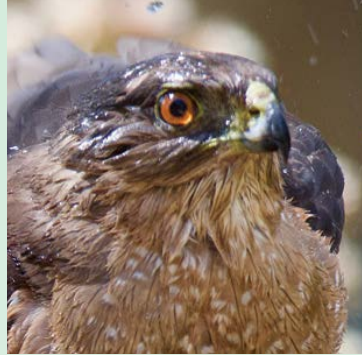
Clockwise from top:  
Cut logs and branches used for owl habitat restoration, by Sandeep Dhar  
California Ground Squirrels by Ed Henry  
Burrowing Owl fledgling, courtesy San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance  
Megan Flaherty with loaded pickup at Ramona Grasslands, by Sandeep Dahr

**The ABA’s 2022 Bird of the Year**  
*The Burrowing Owl, arguably the world’s most charismatic bird species*

### Rodenticides: A Self-defeating Non-solution

Poisons introduced into the environment to control the populations of targeted animals, in this instance rodents, often end up killing many other species up the food chain. Birds and mammals that scavenge the remains or catch and eat poisoned animals are often the very animals that help contain the targeted rodents’ numbers, leaving fewer predators to keep them in check. This cause-and-effect reality nonetheless seems unimportant to many who see poison as a positive solution to their immediate concern. The Burrowing Owls living in a close relationship with California Ground Squirrels are the collateral damage so predictably associated with poisoning.





©Tom Musson

ANNUAL REPORT FYI 2021 / SAN DIEGO AUDUBON SOCIETY

## Hitting the Ground Running

The entirety of this past fiscal year was spent executing our mission under the cloud of a pandemic, threats from many directions, an unshakable uncertainty, and the loss of many loved family members and friends. We were in full-blown survival mode and forced to adapt to a new landscape for doing business. Like our friend the Burrowing Owl, eyes wide from all the Zoom meetings, we sought a deeper grounding for our work and have refocused on the essentials that are core to our mission. We're emerging from a lengthy strategic process to a brighter and "birdier" future. San Diego Audubon is now at the point of articulating a new and forward-looking mission and fleshing out a bold strategic plan that will make the best use of our skills and resources over the next three years.

Meanwhile, our feathered amigos found new admirers as more people went outdoors and discovered the joy of birding. Community-minded citizen scientists rose to greater heights as record amounts of data poured in from the popular birding apps. Binoculars and outdoor gear flew off the shelf. The birding bug spread locally and across the globe. Political leaders made bold commitments to support the environment. Now is the time to push for a cleaner, more sustainable environment with more accessible nature experiences for all. San Diego Audubon is making important strides to capitalize on this new-found passion for nature to help restore healthy habitat for birds and other wildlife, and to increase access for all San Diegans, from indigenous groups to individuals with physical or mental challenges. Birding is for everyone, and we can all benefit from birding.

As this report highlights, San Diego Audubon achieved great success despite the numerous challenges we faced together. And beyond the stats and details, we reflected on our past and re-envisioned our future. Over this coming year, we will continue to:

- Expand messaging and public awareness of and about our work
- Increase, diversify, and nurture a community of inspired environmentalists
- Hone and strengthen our public policy and advocacy work
- Target habitat expansion, restoration, species monitoring, and management plans in select areas throughout the region
- Build the capacity of other organizations and individuals to engage in conservation work throughout the region.

Your support has been extraordinary! Thank you on behalf of San Diego Audubon—and all our winged companions.

Travis Kemnitz, San Diego Audubon Executive Director



(Continued on next page)



Clockwise from top:  
Habitat restoration, by Megan Flaherty  
Cooper's Hawk, by Karen Straus  
Quail chick ©Tom Musson  
Snowy Egret, by David Stump  
Horned Lark, by Ed Henry  
Canada Geese goslings (uncredited)  
Black-bellied Plover, by Ed Henry



## Conservation

Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Conservation program found ways to innovate, adapt, and rise to the challenge of protecting our local habitats and wildlife.

- With volunteer events on pause, we created a new part-time position for local community college students to help ensure the proper maintenance of California Least Tern nesting sites. Our Restoration Assistants contributed hundreds of hours to these efforts, removing thousands of pounds of vegetation and monitoring the nesting terns. This new position provides the perfect opportunity to train the next generation of Conservation leaders, recruited from surrounding and diverse communities.
- These efforts resulted in a successful California Least Tern nesting season, with more than 70 fledglings for the 2020 nesting season, and the beginning of a successful 2021 season.
- We achieved several important wins for seabirds, including successfully pushing for management changes for Northern Anchovy, an important forage fish. After more than eight years of advocacy efforts, catch limits for Northern Anchovy will now be updated annually, ensuring that terns and other birds have more fish to eat in years where the stock has declined.
- We collaborated with biologists in Baja California to protect a newly established California Least Tern nesting colony at Banderas Bay, resulting in the first recorded fledging of Least Terns in this location.
- Our Advocates program continued to grow in size and influence. 28 Advocates were trained in the second year of the program, with participants writing op-eds, meeting with local decision-makers and state officials, and contributing to environmental campaigns such as the 30x30 initiative, the City of San Diego's climate resilience survey, and protecting nesting Golden Eagles in the Ramona Grasslands.
- One of the Audubon Advocate projects, our new Native Seed Library Program, has taken flight, creating a new path for us to support birds and habitats. With funding from the County Board of Supervisors, we have helped create 5 libraries throughout the San Diego region, and we aim to install 30 more in the coming year. The program has the potential to create urban green spaces and improve the habitats we have in residential areas, all while supporting pollinators and other wildlife in areas lacking native plants.
- We continued our push to ReWild Mission Bay, increasing community access with the new Wander the Wetlands program, and

expanding our work to include research on carbon sequestration, as well as working with indigenous communities to improve equity and ensure they are part of the restoration process.

- We continued to build new relationships at Otay Valley Regional Park, leading birding by bike events with Latino Outdoors, and advocating for Latino Conservation Week.
- Community members and Audubon staff successfully passed a native plant proclamation in the City of Chula Vista, declaring the week around Earth Day to be Native Plant week!
- Our educational campaigns are paying off, with increased awareness about the sensitivity of nesting sea and shorebirds, resulting in the first successful nesting of Black Skimmers in Mission Bay for several decades at West Ski Island.
- We spoke up for Grebes at Lake Hodges, pushing the City to ensure that water levels remained stable enough for the nesting birds to tend to their eggs and chicks.



## Education

With many school districts closed to in-person learning, the 2020–2021 school year created a unique opportunity to reconstruct many San Diego Audubon Society Education Programs. After pivoting lessons to a virtual format, we provided 1,794 student interactions with nature. Here are a few more of the many successes from this past fiscal year:

- 815 Nature Discover Kits were distributed to students in grades K–5, containing five weeks of take-home lessons in both English and Spanish
- 16 videos were created to keep students connected to nature in their communities, including three series highlighting Anstine Adventures, Sharing Our Shores South Bay and Salton Sea, and Outdoor Explore
- 40 virtual lab sessions were facilitated, allowing students to engage in hands-on activities and to share ideas together as scientists.





*Sequentially from bottom left page:  
 Student studying SDAS materials  
 Anahí M. Lozano with Seed Library  
 Kendall-Frost Marsh, by Greg Hoxsie  
 Latino Conservation Week  
 Student hike at Silverwood  
 Young boa wrangler at Silverwood  
 Belted Kingfisher, by Neil Solomon*

## Our Sanctuaries

During a trying year, we immersed ourselves in the places we love most and passionately steward: Anstine-Audubon Nature Preserve and Silverwood Wildlife Sanctuary. Our properties faced new challenges such as decreased volunteers and visitors, as well as some of their old adversaries such as invasive plants and threats of wildfire. With two amazing resident managers at the lead, we made great advancements in our efforts to provide critical habitat for birds and other wildlife, as well as unique experiences to our visitors. New visitor registration systems were created, and together, our properties welcomed more than 1,700 visitors, helping them to destress and explore a combined 6.5 acres of trails. In addition, our loyal volunteers provided 700 hours of service during a time of great need, conducting fire clearance, weed removal, hosting of visitor days, and advising on committees.

### Anstine-Audubon Nature Preserve

At 11.6 acres, Anstine is a small but mighty force in the Vista community, providing unique educational programs, opportunities for study, and hiking and birding experiences. Since San Diego Audubon acquired the property more than 20 years ago, there has been tremendous transformation and increased visitation by wildlife and nature lovers alike. Here are some of the key efforts from this past fiscal year:

- We expanded our technology capacity and created online and virtual content to reach a broader audience, staying connected with the students we serve through Vista Unified School District. This included an introductory video (featured on our Anstine webpage) and numerous live broadcasts from Anstine to our students.
- With the impacts of the climate crisis present at Anstine, we were able to secure a California Climate Corps member to work alongside the resident manager and the preserve assistants to mitigate wildfire

threats, as well as to educate the public on the importance of fire-resistant native landscaping.

- We continued to remove invasive plants throughout the property, including mustards, Poison Hemlock, and reeds in the pond, which has been teeming with birds, such as Great Blue Herons, Snowy Egrets, Great Egrets, a Green Heron, Mallards, and Hooded Mergansers. We also observed a Sharp-shinned Hawk and a Peregrine Falcon visiting the preserve.

### Silverwood Wildlife Sanctuary

The stories continue to come in from visitors to Silverwood about how this property is a hidden gem offering a unique experience unlike any other, teaching valuable lessons, offering exciting wildlife encounters, and inspiring generous donations to support the management of the property. Longtime Resident Manager Phil Lambert is the number one contributor to the rich experiences visitors have, as well as the health of the habitat and the abundance of birds and wildlife found there. The importance and history of Silverwood grow stronger every day. Here are a few highlights of this past fiscal year:

- More than 200 students participated in nature and ethnobotany education programs, including groups from the Barona Band of Mission Indians and the Girl Scouts.
- Adult groups of approximately 100 individuals, including a New York Audubon group, Bird Festival groups, and others from around the country flocked to Silverwood to participate in special programming.
- While eradication of invasives property-wide (787 acres) is nearly impossible, we were able to target and eradicate invasives within hotspot zones totaling 69 acres. These efforts help native annuals thrive and increase habitat and resources for the Silverwood residents and visitors.

*(Continued on next page)*

## Our Community

In these trying times, our Board of Directors, staff, volunteers, and supporters have had to adapt and innovate in ways unlike any other time in the history of our organization. We found new funding sources, spent way too much time on Zoom, and immersed ourselves in the nature spaces that we love and that need us most. Here are some changes and accomplishments our community experienced together this fiscal year:

- We saw the retirement of two longtime and impactful Board members, Mike Matherly and David Kimball (who passed last month); both serving more than 15 years, with each leaving a legacy and memories that will carry this organization forward for years.
- We grew our team with the addition of Development Manager Kristen Tongue and Conservation Coordinator Maren Appert, and welcomed Samantha Collins back as Silverwood Resident Assistant.
- While COVID prevented our normal levels of volunteer engagement,

we are thankful to the 488 volunteers who gave 3,196.5 hours and an estimated \$100,721.72 of service in support of activities at San Diego Audubon Society.

- San Diego Audubon, in partnership with independent producer Leland Foerster, created a photo display and short documentary highlighting King Tides, and the preview these offer revealing the impacts of rising sea levels caused by the climate crisis.
- We found ways to engage approximately 900 fellow bird lovers through a hybrid Bird Festival, bird walks, and for the first time, a *Bird Songs for Audubon* concert series and monthly webinars on a variety of bird topics.



## Financial Report FYE 5/31/2021

### Revenues

Contributions & Membership	222,114	13%
Grants	458,432	27%
Program Fees	51,480	3%
Inv/Int/Gain/Loss	960,539	57%
Other	5,500	

**Total Revenues 1,698,065**

### Expenses

Conservation, Education, Sanctuary	693,394	80%
Management	97,059	11%
Fundraising	82,656	9%

**Total Expenses 873,109**

### Assets

Beginning Total Assets	6,076,094
End of Fiscal Year Total Assets	6,901,050

**Asset Gains 824,956**

(left) Western Grebe with chick by KS Nature Photography  
(above right) Rufous Hummingbird

## Our Major Donors

*Government, Foundation, and Corporate Partners*

### \$100,000 and above

San Diego Association of Governments  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
U.S. Small Business Administration

### \$25,000-\$99,999

San Diego Coastkeeper  
Port of San Diego  
Honda Marine Science Foundation  
Malk Nature Fund  
National Audubon Society  
San Diego Gas & Electric  
City of San Diego

### \$10,000-\$24,999

Wetlands Recovery Project  
California Coastal Conservancy  
Resources Legacy Fund  
Audubon California  
Tippett Foundation  
The Mission Bay Park Foundation Fund

### \$9,999 and under

Schoenith Foundation  
Nordson Foundation  
Heller Foundation  
Hispanic Access Foundation  
County of San Diego  
Union Bank Foundation  
Vista Unified School District

### Great Egret Society (\$1,000 and up)

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Bron Anders  
Janet Anderson  
Anita E. Anderson  
Eowyn Bates & Christopher Croom\*  
Thomas Beers  
Susan Buckley\*  
Fay Bullitt  
Lisa Chaddock\*  
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Gary and Denise David  
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Clare Friedman

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Conny Jamison  
Carol J Kemnitz\*  
David Kimball  
Amy Kimball  
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Jorge Sebastian Matt-Navarro  
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Holly McMillan & Jim Chute  
Kris & Jim McMillan

Kathy Moser  
Edie Munk  
Peter & Sally Nelson\*  
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Kathleen & John Romine  
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Robert & Molly Schulze  
Catherine M. Stiefel  
Leslie Howell Stupp  
Susquehanna Intl Group LLP  
Janice Turner  
Dennis & Carol Wilson  
Wendy Youngren

\*Asterisks indicate Sustaining Friends (monthly givers).





# The Dazzling Dance of the Vaux's Swift

by Muriel Spooner

For a few weeks each spring and fall, as the sun sets, thousands of small birds dance and swirl around a chimney in San Diego's East Village neighborhood before they suddenly plunge into its depths to roost for the night. The birds responsible for this magical sight are Vaux's Swifts (*Chaetura vauxi*), the West Coast cousin of the Chimney Swifts found in the eastern U.S.

North America's smallest swift, the Vaux's Swift (pronounced "Vawks") migrates through San Diego County in the spring on its journey to coastal areas of Oregon, Washington, British Columbia, and southeastern Alaska. In the fall, they travel back through San Diego as they migrate south to southern Mexico, Central America, and as far as Venezuela. Recent breeding data in The North American Birds Conservation Initiative's report, *The State of North American Birds 2016*, estimates that 340,000 Vaux's Swifts migrate north from Mexico and Guatemala to breed.

Both sexes feature a plain grayish-brown body that is paler along the upper breast and throat. Their diet consists primarily of flying insects and ballooning spiders. They do not perch between foraging bouts, instead flying continuously until they roost for the night or when nesting. The anatomy of their feet prevents them from perching even while roosting, so the birds cling to rough surfaces. When roosting, they congregate in large groups huddled tightly together to conserve heat. To build their nests, they cement twigs to the nesting site with their sticky saliva.

Their preferred nesting and roosting sites are old-growth forests and large hollow trees—which continue to be lost to logging, development, and fire. This swift species has partially compensated by moving into urban areas, roosting predominantly in old, unused chimneys. The age of the chimney is critical, as they require a rough interior surface to cling to. The interior of modern chimney structures tends to be too smooth for clinging. The Vaux's Swift is listed on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Birds of Conservation Concern 2021 report for the Pacific Northwest region.

Vaux's Happening ([www.vauxhappening.org](http://www.vauxhappening.org)), a nonprofit organization, has been monitoring the Vaux's Swift since 2008. This Audubon project is conducted in cooperation with the State of Washington's Department of Fish and Wildlife, Progressive Animal Welfare Society (PAWS), the Monroe School District, and the Washington state online birding list.

Here in San Diego, the chimney in the East Village area, adjacent to City College and Balboa Park, is used as a roosting site. The swifts have also been spotted feeding in nearby Balboa Park. San Diego has participated in the Vaux's Happening counts since 2009, and a group of SDAS volunteers has assisted in the counting since the spring of 2019.

Spring 2021 was a particularly busy and exciting time for the San Diego East Village chimney, with more than 9,000 birds counted during the observation period, which ran from April 8 to May 3. On a single evening, volunteers counted more than 3,400 birds, a new record for this area. The previous record was 3,000 set on October 17, 2018.

With more development planned in the area where the chimney is located, SDAS has communicated with the site owners to encourage them to keep this chimney available for the swifts. In addition, our friends at the San Diego City College Audubon Club have initiated a plan to build a chimney on campus to provide another roosting site for these captivating birds. SDAS will work with City College on the project, and we'll be downtown looking up at the birds in the spring and fall. If you are interested in seeing the gorgeous gyre of Vaux's Swifts just after sunset, contact us at [conservation@sandiegoaudubon.org](mailto:conservation@sandiegoaudubon.org) to get involved.

## The Vaux's Swifts

By Sree Kandhadai

The chimney calls for dusk to touch the sky,  
Declares with silence it shall serve as home,  
For here are swifts that dot the winds with flight,  
Above the buildings, thousands of them roam.  
Then one decides to lead the way and dives.  
The silhouettes all follow, raining wings,  
Pour out from sun-filled clouds, a net of knives.  
The chimney swallows swifts; the city sings.  
Inside the car we wait to see who's last,  
The one who wants just one more minute's air,  
Sees something in the sky the others passed,  
Who's left behind for wanting more out there.  
Impatient we may be with this last swift,  
But here I see my tale's protagonist.

Photo © Aaron Maizlish

## Honoring the Life and Legacy of David Kimball

As we celebrate with gratitude the achievements this past year, our hearts are filled with thanks for the tremendous contributions David Kimball made to San Diego Audubon over his 20 years of service. Those of us who worked alongside him are amazed at the scope of what he achieved. As Board Chair, he successfully navigated critical issues and helped focus our impact. As Bird Festival Chair, he selflessly labored to create an event and experience that people from around the world flocked to attend. As a leader in conservation, he gave his time and passion to numerous causes that made our County a birdier and brighter place to be. And you can't mention David without thinking about his untiring efforts to restore native flora at the Famosa Slough and Sunset Cliffs Natural Park. As a friend, he touched many lives and shared lasting memories. Thank you David; you are a forever friend.

Travis Kemnitz, Executive Director

## Lesley Handa Wins Major Award

November 2, 2021, San Diego Audubon Board member Lesley Handa became the fifth San Diego County Parks and Recreation Champion. Lesley was recognized as a dedicated environmental leader and passionate scientist for our County. Handa's prodigious efforts are a key part of the conservation work of San Diego Audubon. She dedicated the award to David Kimball, who first asked her to join the Board and continued to inspire her for years.

Lesley also serves on the Board of Directors of the Friends of Famosa Slough, and she has dedicated thousands of hours to these two organizations. She assists with community-led habitat restoration, supports environmental education and advocacy programs, and responds to local environmental threats. She carefully reviews and responds to environmental reports to ensure that development projects minimize environmental damage. Our heartfelt congratulations to Lesley!



# Silverwood Scene *A Quest for California Quail*

by LaTresa Pearson, Sketches editor, and Phil Lambert, Silverwood Resident Manager

I follow Resident Manager Phil Lambert up the Chaparral Trail in search of California Quail, the only precocial species residing at the Silverwood Wildlife Sanctuary. Although quail frequent the observation area below the tube feeders in the early morning and late afternoon, feeding on spilled millet, they are nowhere to be seen on this fall morning. A Cooper's Hawk perching atop a Coast Live Oak explains their absence. It has been stalking the observation area all morning, so we've taken to the trails hoping to catch a glimpse of the skittish birds. Phil pauses and points down at a bowl-shaped depression in the middle of the dirt trail. "Dust bath," he says, indicating we're on the right track. Phil says California Quail like to take dust baths as part of their preening routine. According to David Allen Sibley in his book, *What It's Like to be a Bird*, we don't really know why some birds take dust baths. One possibility is that the dust enhances the preen oil in some way, helping to waterproof and condition the feathers or inhibit bacteria and parasites.

As we continue up the trail, we come across another dust bath, but the birds remain elusive. Phil tells me the quail tend to hang out in this area rather than higher up on the ridge because the tall, dense chaparral provides good cover from predators such as the Cooper's Hawks and Sharp-shinned Hawks. The chaparral plants also provide their primary source of food, seeds. Phil has observed them foraging on seeds from Ceanothus, Chia, California Buckwheat, Chamise, Monkey Flower, and several spring annuals, as well as on the greenery of Miner's Lettuce and invasive Chickweed. He's also seen them feeding on squashed acorns along the driveway to the manager's residence. During the spring breeding season, the quails are presumed to nest on the ground below the dense chaparral. "I've never found an actual nest site," says Phil. Nor has he observed any kind of courtship or mating ritual. "They're pretty secretive," he says.

While you may not be able to observe the entire nesting process of Silverwood's quails, as you can with the Western Bluebirds and the Ash-throated Flycatchers, you can watch pairs of adults bring their broods to the observation area to feed in late May and June. Phil says each pair usually has about 10 chicks in tow. As precocial birds, quail chicks are well-developed when they hatch. They can immediately follow their parents and peck at the ground to feed. "The quail don't start bringing the chicks in until they're big enough to protect themselves," says Phil. "They're hidden until they're capable of running away from predators."

I can attest to the California Quail's hiding skills, with or without chicks. On this fall day, I am unsuccessful in my attempts to see the shy birds, but I return late one afternoon a few weeks later to try my luck again. When I arrive, not a single bird of any species greets me. It's unseasonably warm, so I sit in the shade and wait for the sun to begin its



Female California Quail with brood. Photo © Jeremy Cohen. (Below) Male quail by LaTresa Pearson.

descent. A Yellow-rumped Warbler rewards my patience, stopping at the nearby water feature for a drink. A Hermit Thrush flies down to join it, followed by a second Yellow-rumped Warbler and a second Hermit Thrush. Slowly, other birds begin to emerge—White-crowned Sparrows, a pair of California Scrub-Jays, a pair of Northern Flickers. Phil joins me in the observation area, and we soon hear a familiar sound. "Pit, pit, pit, pit, pit." "Here they come," says Phil. "As soon as the shadow hits the Sugar Bush, the quail come," he laughs. We watch a male and female pair cautiously descend to the area below the tube feeders and begin pecking and scratching at the ground, kicking up leaves as they forage for food. Two more pairs make their way down. One of the females hops up on the lower water feature for a cool drink on this warm, dry day. When she finishes, a male hops up and takes his turn, joined by a pair of juvenile White-crowned Sparrows. The pairs soon disappear back into the dense chaparral, and I begin making my way back to the parking lot with the remaining daylight. As I pass the intersection of the Harry Woodward and Chaparral Trails, I hear a quiet "pit, pit, pit" and rustling in the bushes. I smile and wish them a good night as I pass by.



## Silverwood Calendar

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

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 (above) for all updates.



# A Teachable Moment *Education's Return to In-person Learning*

by Hayley Heiner, Education Manager

After more than a year of virtual programs, our Education Department is thrilled that this fall brought our return to in-person teaching. Although we're still offering a handful of programs online, our naturalists are back in action, doing what they do best and sharing the joy of nature, wildlife, and science with students across the county. With generous enrichment funding from Vista Unified School District, we have been focusing efforts on our Anstine Adventures program, bringing exploration and hands-on science to seven elementary schools across the district. While students are not yet able to resume their field trips to our Anstine Audubon Nature Preserve, this fall brought new opportunities for us to visit students on their campuses and to help them connect with the nature they see every day around their schools. Students have been dissecting owl pellets, learning tips and tricks for spotting local birds, designing their own art projects from natural materials, and so much more during our time together.

Each school brings something different for our naturalists to help students explore, allowing students to feel true ownership over the nature spaces around their campus as they advise us on the best places to lead activities. We've been finding huge gardens housing various native plants and

pollinators, as well as small trails around campus with an abundance of hawks. In addition, we were able to take students from one of our schools to a two-acre habitat preserve connected to their campus, fondly referred to as "The Habitat."

Following a year with such limited interaction and an array of challenges getting students out from behind screens, it seems that our schools and partners are understanding now more than ever the true value of outdoor education. We are grateful our videos and Zoom classes were able to keep students connected during the pandemic, but we have experienced a newfound sense of joy from closing our laptops and trading them in for binoculars and hiking boots. As we continue moving back into classrooms and prepare for the long-awaited return of field trips, we do so with a sense of appreciation and rejuvenation. We are so happy to be back doing what we love and feel a deeper sense of purpose and importance recalling all those times students were limited in experiencing nature. We will remember the past year, with its challenges and lessons, but we look forward to inspiring the next generation of outdoor stewards.



*Some of the quality educational materials developed by our education staff.*

## San Diego Bird Festival 2022 *Birds of ALL Feathers, Come Flock Together*

We are rapidly approaching 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, and **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

**Naturescaping** your yard with native plants

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

*Lewis's Woodpecker  
by Ed Henry*



## Introductory Birding Course

An introductory bird identification course designed for those with little or no formal experience at identifying birds will be offered again this winter. It will meet on four Saturday mornings at the Tecolote Nature Center starting on February 26, 2022, and will also include at least two field trips. The course will focus on learning to identify common local birds but will also cover equipment, good places to bird locally, and much more. The instructor is SDAS past president Phil Pryde, who has taught the course for more than 20 years. The cost is \$95. For more information and instructions on enrolling, go to [www.sandiegoriver.org](http://www.sandiegoriver.org) and click on "News and Updates." We hope to see you on February 26!





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4010 Morena Blvd. Ste. 100  
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## Take the Plunge!

There are reasons why we call all of our loyal supporters *Friends*. Friends share common values and interests. They stand by you when you need them most. They're there for you in challenging times. Friends are essential! Your Friendship means a great deal not only to San Diego Audubon but also to the future of our region's birds, other wildlife, and their habitats. From an entry-level student membership to our Great Egret benefactors, every contribution matters!

**Join or Renew as a Member.** Make monthly or yearly contributions, meet other bird enthusiasts, and enjoy member benefits, too.

**Make a Donation.** Make a tax-deductible gift to support our initiatives, our many programs, and both of our sanctuaries.

**Leave a Legacy.** Make plans today for a gift tomorrow and become part of our esteemed Golden Eagle Legacy Club.

**Volunteer.** Contribute your time and talents.

Visit [SanDiegoAudubon.org/JoinOurFlock](http://SanDiegoAudubon.org/JoinOurFlock)



Photos by Ed Henry



We encourage you—especially if you are already a National Audubon member—to become a Friend of San Diego Audubon to support our local conservation and education programs.

## Sketches SAN DIEGO AUDUBON

SKETCHES is published quarterly.

For details on submissions and deadlines, please contact:  
LaTresa Pearson at [lens.pearson@sbcglobal.net](mailto:lens.pearson@sbcglobal.net)

*The office is currently open to visitors.*

*Please follow appropriate COVID-19 guidelines.*  
4010 Morena Blvd. Ste. 100, San Diego, CA 92117

Messages can be left at any time by email:  
[sdaudubon@sandiegoaudubon.org](mailto:sdaudubon@sandiegoaudubon.org).  
(Emails might be more effective than calling.)

**San Diego Audubon Office: 858-273-7800**

California Audubon Society: <http://ca.audubon.org>

National Audubon Society: <http://www.audubon.org>

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