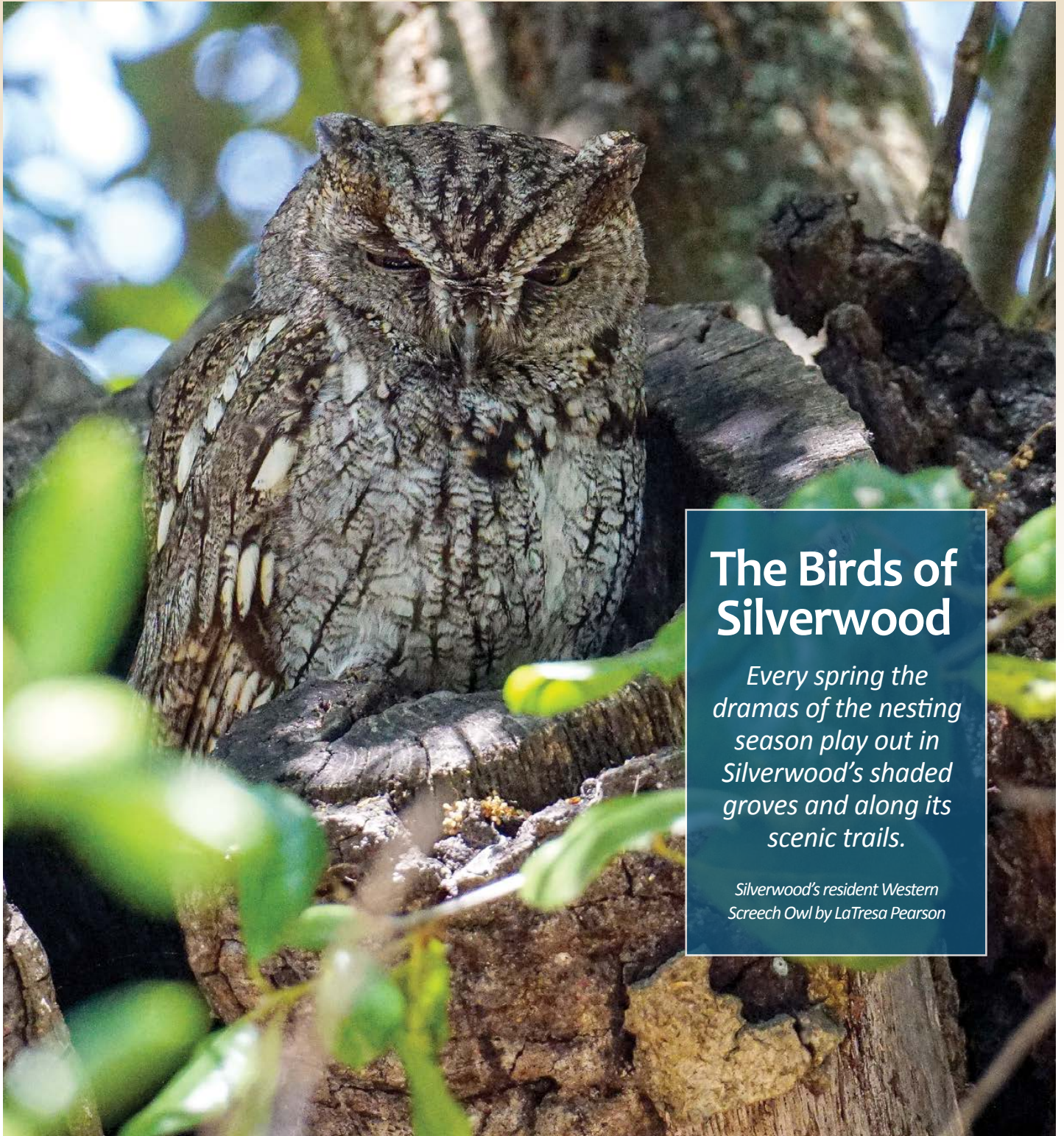


Sketches

JULY/AUGUST 2021 • VOLUME 72 • NUMBER 6

SAN DIEGO AUDUBON



The Birds of Silverwood

Every spring the dramas of the nesting season play out in Silverwood's shaded groves and along its scenic trails.

Silverwood's resident Western Screech Owl by LaTresa Pearson

The Birds of Silverwood

Every Bird has a Story to Tell... If We're Willing to Watch and Listen

by LaTresa Pearson

It's an early May morning, and the fog has just begun to lift when I enter the Silverwood Wildlife Sanctuary by way of the Harry Woodward Trail. A dense thicket of White Bark Ceanothus forms an arched walkway, inviting me in and promising a magical adventure. Chattering from the canopy of a Coast Live Oak catches my attention, and I glance up to see a small grayish-brown Oak Titmouse. I watch for a moment as it busily flits from branch to branch, and then I continue down the leaf-covered path until I cross a small bridge leading to the bird observation area. I sit on one of the benches facing several feeders stationed throughout the area, which are designed to attract the many species of birds residing in the 785-acre coastal chaparral and riparian oak woodland that make up the Lakeside sanctuary.

This morning, California Scrub-Jays dominate the Magnum screened sunflower-seed feeder hanging from an oak tree close to the benches, as well as the tube feeders stationed in the lower area. Their loud squawks fill the air as they dart through the oaks, landing on the hanging feeder with a force that sends it swinging

back and forth, scattering the House Finches who attempt to sneak a few seeds between Scrub-Jay raids. The jays attack the tube feeders with similar force, squabbling with each other for position and sending millet flying to the ground, much to the delight of the California Quail, Mourning Doves, Spotted Towhees, and California Ground Squirrels foraging below.

While the Scrub-Jays can be bullies, they play an important role at Silverwood, Resident Manager Phillip Lambert tells me. Of all the birds here, including the Acorn Woodpeckers and Northern Flickers, the Scrub-Jays are the only ones who help propagate the Coast Live Oak trees. They will take an acorn to a hiding place, move some leaf litter, dig a small shallow hole, place the acorn in the hole, then cover it back up with the leaf litter. This process gives the acorn just the right amount of aeration and moisture to sprout, explains Phil. It also helps mycorrhizal fungi to form at the tree's roots. These fungi help deliver water and nutrients to the tree, as well as provide protection from diseases and attacking insects. During one of my visits, Phil took me to one such hiding place and showed me a tiny oak seedling, only about three or four inches high. As he brushed the leaf litter and a bit of dirt away from its base, we could still see the acorn from which it sprouted.

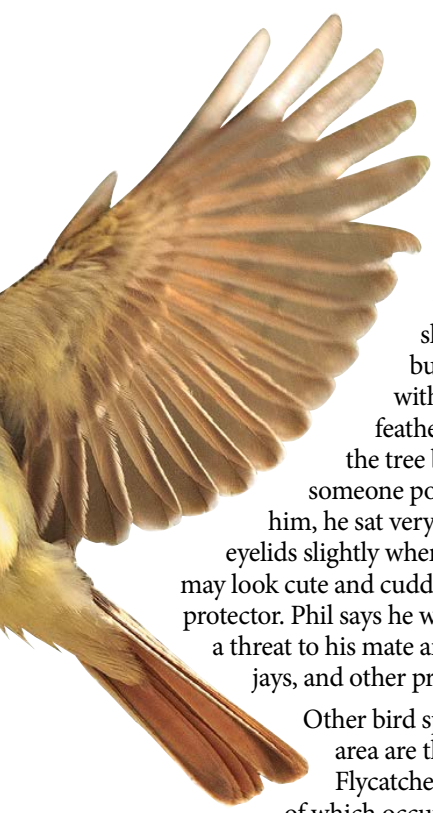
According to David Allen Sibley's new book, *What It's Like to Be a Bird*, jays are experts at hiding food. "Using their navigational abilities and extraordinary memory, they can keep track of thousands of different hidden items," Sibley writes. They'll even spy on each other and steal food if they get the opportunity. Jays will also sneak back to a hiding place and move food if they think another Jay has been spying on them. A California Scrub-Jay can store up to 5,000 acorns in the fall, which they then return to for food in the winter and spring, according to Sibley. "The jays come back to the acorns, but they don't get all of them," Phil says. It's the forgotten or unneeded acorns that grow into the next acorn-producing oak tree.

Another species of bird that contributes to the health of the oak woodlands at Silverwood is the Western Screech-Owl. For the past 12 years, a monogamous pair of Western Screech-Owls have been nesting in the observation area, providing an intimate view of their behavior. One day Phil noticed the partial carcasses of several large beetles below one of the oaks where the owls roost. The carcasses were the remnants of California Prionus beetles, which lay their eggs in the roots of trees, including oaks. The larvae live underground feeding on the roots for three to five years, causing extensive damage to the root system, sometimes killing the tree. The hungry owls provide effective and environmentally friendly pest control.

The pair spend their days roosting in various tree cavities in the



Western Bluebirds (male to left, female in nest box above) are regular nesters and colorful ambassadors for Silverwood's observation area. Photos by LaTresa Pearson.



Ash-throated Flycatcher by Rick Derevan

observation area. During my visits, the male vigilantly stood guard at the mouth of the hollowed out oak trunk where their nest is located this year. His compact size—slightly shorter than an American Robin, but considerably stouter—along with the colors and patterns of his feathers, which perfectly blend in with the tree bark, make him easy to miss unless someone points him out. When I observed him, he sat very still, only occasionally lifting his eyelids slightly when a noise disturbed him. While he may look cute and cuddly, he is a formidable hunter and protector. Phil says he will chase away anything he deems a threat to his mate and their young, including crows, jays, and other predators.

Other bird species nesting in the observation area are the popular Ash-throated Flycatchers and Western Bluebirds, each of which occupies boxes hanging from Coast Live Oaks outside the manager's residence. Ash and Ashley, a pair of Ash-throated Flycatchers, began charming visitors to Silverwood when they took up residence about a decade ago. Each spring, Ash would arrive in April to secure the nesting site, and then Ashley would follow a week or two later. "What's amazing about Ash-throateds is they don't stay together when they leave the mating site," Phil tells me. Even though Ash-throated Flycatchers are monogamous, every year between late July and August when they finish rearing their young, they depart separately for Mexico or Central America on a molt migration. It takes them more than a month to grow new feathers, which requires an enormous amount of energy, so like many species of birds, they head to warm environments replete with the insects they need to sustain them through the process.

But, like clockwork, Ash and Ashley would reconnect at Silverwood each spring to raise their young among the riparian oak woodlands and chaparral. During their second season at Silverwood, Phil started offering mealworms to the pair when he was feeding the resident Western Bluebirds. At first, only Ash would venture over, but eventually Ashley would come, too. Phil began by throwing the mealworms to the ground. He then tried throwing them up in the air. Ash learned to fly from a perch in the trees and catch them midair. Seeing Ash repeatedly perform this trick, a male Western Bluebird surprised Phil one day by flying down in front of Ash to try to grab the mealworms from the air before Ash could get them. "That's not something a Bluebird normally does," he says. In *What It's Like to Be a Bird*, Sibley writes that flycatchers can perform tasks like this due in part to their fast image processing capabilities. While birds can process images twice as fast as we can, flycatchers have the fastest image processing capabilities of any birds tested, enabling them to track rapidly moving insects during high-speed flight.

To the delight of many Silverwood visitors, Ash will even fly to Phil and snatch the

mealworms right from his fingers. I witnessed this firsthand on one of my visits. As Phil and I talk, he stops mid-sentence and listens to a calling bird. "There's Ash," he says, pointing in the direction of the sound. He puts his lips together and returns the familiar call, "Prrrt, prrrt, prrrt." After a few tries, a grayish-brown bird flies overhead and perches on a thin branch of a nearby oak tree. From below, I can make out his long cinnamon-colored tail and pale lemon belly. As Phil calls and talks to him, Ash tilts his head from side to side, eyeing us from above. Phil goes



California Scrub-Jay by David Stump

inside the residence and comes out with a handful of mealworms. He pinches a few between his fingers and stretches his arm out in front of him. In a blink, Ash darts to Phil, seizes the mealworms from his fingers, and retreats to another perch to gobble them down. I ask Phil how he's been able to recognize Ash and Ashley as the same pair over the years. It's the mealworms, he tells me. Other Ash-throated Flycatchers nest in oak cavities at Silverwood or one of the adjacent properties, but only Ash and Ashley would come to him for mealworms.

This year, Ash arrived on schedule, but Ashley failed to appear. "Everything's changed since Ashley..." Phil's voice trails off before finishing the sentence. When Ash arrived to secure their usual nest box, a pair of Western Bluebirds had already established at the Bluebird box on an oak nearby. The pair included a new female,

who was uncomfortable with Ash's close proximity to her nest. She tried to drive him away, but Ash held his ground, securing the site while he waited for Ashley to arrive. "He still looks for her," says Phil. He calls Ashley's name out loud to demonstrate. Ash, perched in an oak near us, leans forward and bobs his head up and down, looking agitated.

When Ashley failed to show up after a few weeks, Phil says Ash showed a new female Ash-throated Flycatcher the nest box.

(Continued on page 4)



"Ash" by Ed Henry

(Continued from page 3)

Initially, the new female seemed resistant to mating with Ash. As Phil and I stood near the residence, she flew to a branch near the box. Ash tried to mount her, but she rejected his advances and flew off. Moments later, however, she returned to the branch with nesting material in her beak, then flew into the box briefly before flying off again. Phil points out it's the first time she's been back to the box in three or four days, so he hopes this is a promising sign. Within a few days, I receive an email update from Phil. "I do think she is now sitting on eggs in the box," he writes. "She'll go in and not come out. So this is the year Ash had to find a new mate."

At the Bluebird nest box nearby, a male Western Bluebird had a tough time wooing his new mate this season, too, but ultimately his persistence paid off. His mate from the previous year disappeared, says Phil, and a new female showed up while he was still feeding the juveniles. "Out of all the years I've seen males trying to woo a female, he usually only has to bring her food once or twice before mating," he says. "This one, she's a princess." He had to keep bringing her food again and again before she finally accepted his advances.



Lawrence's Goldfinches by LaTresa Pearson

As we're talking, Phil needs to attend to something else, so I walk toward the back of the residence to get a better look at this year's nesting pair. The brilliant blue and rust male is perched toward the end of a bare branch near the nest box. The female, who is grayish brown with tinges of blue, is perched on another bare branch. She looks at me tentatively, then flies to a utility box attached to a low post near the residence. Eyeing the ground where Phil usually tosses mealworms, she flies low and beats her wings to hover a few feet over the area for a moment. When she sees there aren't any mealworms, she turns in midair and flies back to the utility box. She looks at me expectantly, and then repeats this process a few more times before giving up and flying into her nest box. I picture her wearing a tiny crown as she stares down at me with what I imagine to be disdain. Fortunately, Phil returns and throws some mealworms on the ground. The male swoops down from his perch first, landing and immediately scooping up a beak full. The female follows, nabbing a single mealworm and then hopping to the top of a landscape light to daintily swallow it down.

Another longtime Silverwood resident who likes to fly in for

a mealworm snack is Rusty, a Canyon Wren who's been visiting the observation area since 2006. Rusty lives with his mate among the boulders along the ridgeline, and normally brings their offspring down to the observation area for mealworms during the summer. While he didn't come down from the ridge during my visits in May, I heard his delightful cascading song, "tee-tee-tee-tee-tew-tew-tew-tew," as I walked up the Chaparral Trail and along the Circuit Trail one early Wednesday morning. I scanned the boulders with my binoculars, hoping to spot the small, rust-colored bird with his distinctive white throat hopping along the rock outcrops foraging for insects and spiders, but I had to be satisfied with a song instead of a sighting on this particular visit. I tried my luck with the two other nesting pairs of Canyon Wrens residing at Silverwood. A female named Oxidation, who also comes to the observation area for mealworms during the summer, nests with her mate between the Sunset and Quail Trails, and another pair nests beyond the McConnell Trail. While walking the McConnell Trail, I was treated once again to the familiar cascading notes of the Canyon Wren's song, but the birds remained elusive.



Canyon Wren by Ed Henry

I was lucky to see a number of other bird species during my visits, including a pair of White-breasted Nuthatches and a Swainson's Thrush flying among the oaks in the observation area, a pair of Hooded Orioles feeding at the hummingbird feeders, and a pair of Black-headed Grosbeaks feeding at the sunflower seed feeder, as well as Anna's Hummingbirds sipping nectar from the Showy Penstemon and numerous other spring-blooming wildflowers. A flock of Lawrence's Goldfinches foraging among this year's prolific display of Popcorn flowers and Caterpillar Phacelia completed my magical adventure at Silverwood.

If you are encouraged by this article to visit Silverwood and hike its trails, please take a minute or two and download the pdf file of the complete bird checklist (133 species) found on our Silverwood page (www.sandiegoaudubon.org/our-work/Silverwood). And while you're there, check out the complete plant species list (362 species), mammal checklist (26 species) and reptile and amphibian list (38 species).

Silverwood Wildlife Sanctuary, as in past years, will be closed for August and September and will reopen in October. If you plan a July visit, please register online on the Silverwood page.



Education SDAS *Sharing our Shores: South Bay Video Series*

by Hayley Heiner, Education Manager

In Spring of 2021, our education department offered our Sharing our Shores: South Bay program to the fourth and fifth grade students of the South Bay Union School District in Imperial Beach. Thanks to the generous funding of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and their SoCal Urban Wildlife Refuge program, this is the fourth year San Diego Audubon has offered our Sharing our Shores: South Bay program to the Imperial Beach community. This year, more than ever, students needed a connection to the nature spaces in the community.



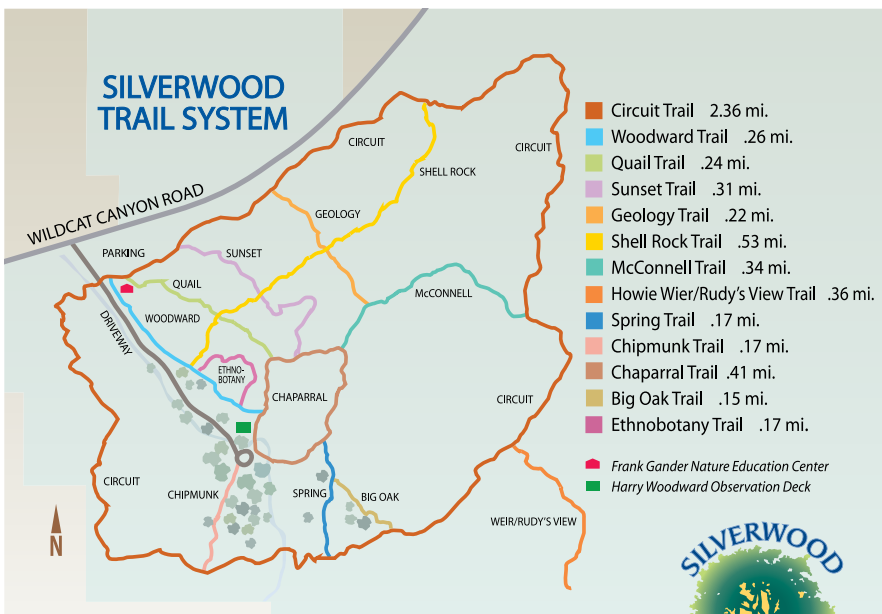
American Avocet by Craig Chaddock

South Bay students worked remotely for the entirety of the 2020–2021 school year, so San Diego Audubon modified our program into a series of short videos highlighting the unique habitats and species of the San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge. In past years, our students have developed connections to this beautiful area through field trips to the Bayside Birding and Walking Trail by viewing a wide range of birds, including many climate-threatened and endangered species. The footage features flocks of Black-Necked Stilts, Osprey catching fish, American Avocets foraging for food, and swimming Ridgway's Rails to inspire and engage our students with the refuge in their community.

One component we're excited about that remained the same is our student art project creating signs to help inform and educate the public about the importance of the refuge for local and migratory coastal birds. With more people visiting their neighborhood nature spaces and seeking to enjoy the benefits of the outdoors, many of our parks have been seeing increased visitation and a range of accompanying impacts on the environment. This makes our students' help and dedication to the area more important than ever! During the program, students learn about the many threats wildlife face in the refuge, including pollution, off-trail usage, habitat loss, and even off-leash dogs. Inspired to tackle an issue they feel passionate about changing, students designed their own signs equipped with an informative conservation message and art reflecting the different birds, habitats, and wildlife they want to help protect. With each student expressing their own creativity, altogether the signs highlight a range of different actions we can all take across our communities to help wildlife thrive. The student art will be available for view on San Diego Audubon's website as well as installed at the refuge for visitors to enjoy. Let's all keep in mind their helpful messages as we enjoy our trails, beaches, and other nature spaces this summer.



A Grateful Salute to Our 2021 Silverwood Adopt-A-Trail Sponsors



From sandy washes to the rugged ridgeline, from thickets of Laurel Sumac, Ceanothus, and Scrub Oak to our flowering Cienega, Silverwood's trail system offers a multitude of nature experiences.



The Adopt-A-Trail program provides financial support for the upkeep of Silverwood's 13 trails, ranging from 0.24 mile to 2.36 miles. Adoptions directly support trail maintenance projects and make it possible for students, researchers, and visitors to explore and enjoy the beauty of our sanctuary.

2021 Silverwood Trail Adopters

- Big Oak Trail..... Vickie Church
- Chaparral Trail..... Sally and Pete Nelson
- Chipmunk Trail..... Betsy Rudee
- Circuit Trail..... Conny Jaimison
- Ethnobotany Trail.... Peter and Raydene St. Clair
- Geology Trail..... Bron and Eric Anders
- McConnell Trail..... Holly McMillan and Jim Chute
in Recognition of Jen Hajj
- Quail Trail..... Phil Pryde
- Shell Rock Trail..... Lisa Heinz
- Spring Trail..... Brian and Iliana Van Wanseele
- Sunset Trail..... Pamela Fair and Glen Sullivan
- Howie Wier/Rudy's View Trail..... Wendy Youngren
- Woodward Trail..... Debbie Woodward

Successful Native Seed Library Program Looking to Branch Out

by Anahí Méndez Lozano

The Native Seed Library idea started as a project for the San Diego Audubon Advocacy Training of 2020. Our goal is to engage communities with their local ecosystems and to create awareness of the benefits native plants pose for humans, birds and pollinators. But what is a native seed library, you might be asking? Somewhat like a book library, a native seed library provides free native seed packets that people can take home. Homeowners then plant the seeds, grow the seedlings to maturity, and after the plants have flowered, collect the seeds and return them to the library so other people can borrow them. We are looking to create new libraries in a variety of neighborhoods and increase access to native plants, which may currently be a challenge in some areas of San Diego. Our vision is that through experimentation and gardening, people can learn firsthand the benefits native plants bring to us and to our local ecosystems. We hope that through this project people form a stronger sense of community, and become advocates for native plants themselves—and start encouraging others to use native plants in their landscaping.

If you're interested in creating a native seed library for your community, please contact our Conservation staff at conservation@sandiegoaudubon.org. We have grant funding to supply seeds and signs where community members can provide the space and build (or contract to build) a library, as shown to right. We can suggest sources for you.



Anahí Méndez Lozano stands next to the prototypical seed library outside at a residence at the head of Manzanita Canyon in City Heights. Its inaugural offering was quickly snapped up by grateful gardeners, and our Conservation staff soon found itself fielding multiple requests for more seeds and additional "libraries."



San Diego Audubon Spearheads Chula Vista Native Plant Earth Week Proclamation

by Cristina Santa Maria, a member of SDAS Conservation Committee and the Otay Valley Regional Park Citizen Advisory Council

Native plant communities are critical for declining pollinator populations. San Diego Audubon, with the help of thousands of volunteers, has been focusing on restoration work in local habitats for decades. We've just started branching out our support for native plants, and the birds that use them, with municipal proclamations in support of native plants.

Though this new idea is less physical than planting narrow-leaf milkweed, it could support native plants throughout an entire community. This past month, Adrian D'mirez, our Restoration Assistant, successfully led a municipal initiative in Chula Vista resulting in the City proclaiming April 17–April 24 as Annual Native Plant Earth Week, and encouraging its residents to make every effort to use native plants in their gardens.

Chula Vista Mayor Mary Salas, standing before the City Council, proudly displays the official proclamation flanked by Adrian D'mirez (left) and SDAS Vice President Lisa Chaddock.

Anstine Ambles *The Resourceful Predator Behind the Cartoon*

by Christian Cormier, Anstine Assistant

Decades of doing battle with a cartoon coyote have given the Greater Roadrunner (*Geococcyx californianus*) a comical, almost cuddly persona in the eyes of the public. This Looney Tunes characterization is bolstered by the simple fact that the vast majority of people have never even caught a fleeting glimpse of this elusive avian. But underneath the cartoon antics lies an animal that is not only one of the most fascinating birds in the American Southwest, but also a relentless and efficient hunter.

First things first; no, they do not say “beep beep” as their call. But like many other members of the cuckoo (*Cuculidae*) family, they have a variety of vocalizations at their disposal. Males will give a far-reaching cooing song in the early morning to attract females during nesting season and, if successful, will pair for life with their mate. While foraging together, both the male and the female will produce a series of whirs, chirs, and growls, which at times can only be described as a more muted, slightly less terrifying version of the calls made by the velociraptors in Jurassic Park. And much like their CGI movie counterparts, Greater Roadrunners will truly eat any prey they can get their bill around. Lizards, small rodents, fledgling birds, scorpions, and even venomous snakes are all part of the Roadrunner’s diet. Despite being capable of short distance flights, Greater Roadrunners run down their prey at speeds up to 20 mph, making them the fastest running non-flightless bird!



The Greater Roadrunner. Photo by Gerry Tietje.



If this account of the Greater Roadrunner has given you a Wile E. Coyote-esque desire to spot this speedy sprinter for yourself, the Anstine-Audubon Nature Preserve currently contains two (presumably male and female) Roadrunners that might be spotted by a patient observer. The rich variety of local plants supports a thriving insect population, which in turn allows a healthy population of lizards and small rodents, giving the resident Roadrunners ample opportunities to hunt. If you’re lucky enough to hear one call, listen for the alarm calls of the creatures around you in response as chipmunks and birds of all kinds are leery of this very quick cuckoo.

Anstine is closed for the summer months of June through September and will reopen in October, 2021.

Yes, there is a Lesser Roadrunner (left), native to the scrub habitat of southwestern Mexico. There is a group of Latin American “ground cuckoos,” some more terrestrial than others, with strong legs and long, swooping tails. Photo by Francesco Veronesi (Wikipedia).

A Special Thank You...

As our E.D. Travis Kemnitz recently pointed out, “it takes a village” to produce an annual schedule of *Sketches*, and I want to personally thank him and our excellent staff for their support in writing, reviewing, and last-minute proofing. Our editor, Shari Dorantes Hatch, has kept us sharply focused and accurate, and our growing pool of volunteer writers (including LaTresa Pearson, featured in this issue) bring a range of skills to our publication, now 72 volumes (years) old. Our list of photographers is way too long to include here, but I need to at least mention Craig Chaddock, Karen Straus, Bruno Enriquez Struck, Krisztina Scheeff, and Ed Henry. Ed’s photo of a meadowlark modeled for the drawing on the last issue’s cover. *David Stump, Communications Chair*

SDAS Welcomes Kristen Tongue, Our New Development Manager

The search committee formed to find a new Development Manager has successfully filled the position with the hiring of Kristen Tongue, who has most recently served on the staff of Outside the Lens, a digital media and youth services nonprofit, and Lions, Tigers and Bears, an Alpine-based preserve for retired predators. Her love of the natural world and passion for environmental protections express Kristen’s core values, and she is eager to go to work with Travis and our full staff and board to help us meet our growth goals.

Kristen Tongue





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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



Photos by
Karen Straus



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 bimonthly, in odd-numbered months. For details on submissions and deadlines, please contact: David Stump at dwestump@icloud.com

The office is now open to visitors.

Please follow appropriate guidelines.

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Messages can be left at any time by email:

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(Emails may be more effective than calling.)

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