



# WESTERN TANAGER

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*U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Photo by Noel Snyder*

## SPECIAL CONDOR ISSUE

# A Good Day at the Sign

by Eric V. Johnson

I awaken to a fly buzzing around my head. I scrunch deeper into the sleeping bag, but my eyes open anyway and report that it is getting lighter. A band of sky just above the eastern horizon is flaming orange; brilliant Venus and a waning crescent moon gleam high in the lavender region above it. Perhaps the only saving grace of air pollution, I reflect, is the colorful display it generates at low sun angles. Not a cloud in the sky; the air is cool and absolutely still. California and Mountain Quail herald the day from the undergrowth down in the canyon to our north, the one with its perennial, "Where are you?", the other with a melodious "Cherk... cherk."

We are camped, as some of us have camped every night the past few summers and falls, at a little-known Forest Service campground called Valle Vista. It is a dry camp, no water at all — but it is free. The price is right! The vegetation is pinyon pine and desert scrub oak, interspersed with other chaparral plants. The faint aroma of outhouse drifts down the hillside from two little green shacks perched on the summit; it mingles with the fresh smell of damp, dried grass.

Here in Ventura County, just over the Kern County line, the land rises abruptly from the flat, agriculturalized San Joaquin Valley. Cotton fields give way to foothill grasslands jumbled by the San Andreas fault into mazes of interconnecting canyons. Our camp is in the pinyon-juniper assemblage that covers the north-facing slopes above and to the south of the rangelands.

My watch beeps 6:30, so I climb out, fire up the Coleman stove, and put on a kettle of water. My two students who are on duty these next few days stir, grumble (I am deliberately noisy), and climb out of their bags to join me. Breakfast can be almost anything — eggs and bacon wrapped in tortillas are good; for me the standby is instant oatmeal washed down with orange juice and coffee. If Tom were here, he'd have a peanut butter sandwich. We don't talk much — a few comments on the weather ("Looks like a good day, maybe kinda hot") and perhaps a remark on the birds ("Did you hear the screech owl in camp last night? Look — the Mountain Chickadees are down already.") Breakfast dishes are cleaned perfunctorily with a rinse in warm water, then all cooking and sleeping gear is packed into the vehicles. At 7:30 we leave, and hopefully leave no evidence of our presence. As we head down the road toward our observation point, cot-

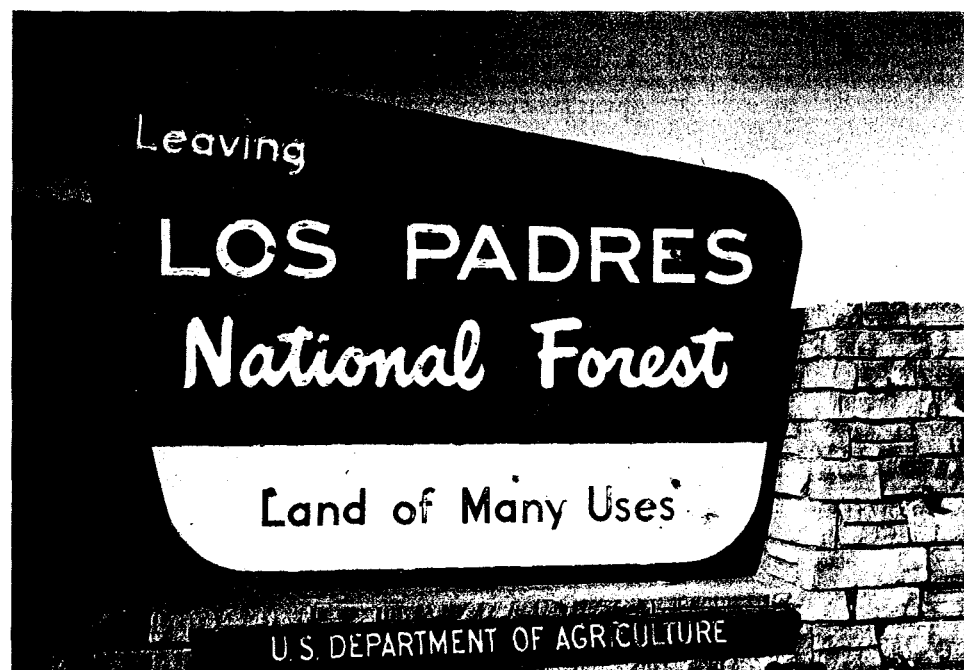


Photo by Eric Johnson

tontails bound across the pavement and freeze next to roadside cover, in sight but only a hop from safety.

\* \* \*

I guess it all really got started back in September of 1976 (it seems so long ago) when I drove up this road with my family, heading for Mt. Pinos. A bird soaring over the rangeland made a fool of me. I first called it a Raven, then a Red-Tail, then a Turkey Vulture, a Golden Eagle, and finally, with a squeal of brakes, a juvenile California Condor. Two years later, this time in August, a graduate student and I, returning to San Luis Obispo from Mount Pinos, saw a group of ten condors rising out of a small canyon in nearly the same place. But the 'coup de grace' was in the fall of 1980, October 5 to be exact, when my ornithology class witnessed 14 condors exiting a canyon here. That did it! I called the newly-established Condor Research Center in Ventura, and informed biologists Noel Snyder and John Ogden of our find. Throughout that winter and the following spring my more dedicated students and I made weekly pilgrimages to the area, to record condor presence and movements, and to get our 'condor fix.' The birds are addictive; once you've seen one, you have to keep going back! We mailed reports of our observations to Ventura.

\* \* \*

Two miles northeast of the campground we pull over next to a large board sign mounted on a stone pedestal. On the east side, facing us, it announces, "Leaving Los Padres National Forest;" on the west, it proclaims simply, "Los Padres National Forest." First things first. We uncase two cameras, affix 400 mm lenses, check apertures and focusing, note frame counters. We crosscheck with yesterday's exposure records to make sure we can account for every picture taken. Telescopes are positioned, then the tarp goes up. It is a poncho, affixed in part to the sign and supported by aluminum poles tethered to ground stakes. There is no natural shade here; you bring your own. We hang out our shingle that announces who we are, and put a rock on top of a pile of brochures we hand out to the interested. It may be windy later. Tracy hooks up the antenna to the telemetry receiver and moves off 20 yards to take the 8 o'clock reading. Nothing. We set our lawn chairs in the shade of the tarp; it is already warm, and there is no wind whatsoever. The flies are a nuisance, but the Golden Eagle is there again this morning, perched on his favorite power pole as he awaits the updrafts.

The view from here is stupendous. At 4600 feet (whoops — 1402 meters) we have a commanding view from the southeast around to the north. Our landmarks are straightforward, and those for which we could find no names we named ourselves: Mount Abel to the southeast, then, swinging counterclockwise, Apache Saddle, Brush Mountain, Blue Ridge, Oak Knoll, Four-bush Hill, S-road Hill, Scar, Fence Hill, Old Burn, Bitter Creek Canyon, Juniper Knoll. Bear Mountain, beyond Oak Knoll and across the San Joaquin Valley, is scarcely visible above the haze layer. We face north, and the valley far out in front of us looks like a giant's checkerboard with green and brown fields. The Sierras today are obscured by smog. You have to come in the winter to be sure of seeing them rising beyond Bakersfield and Fresno. In summer and fall, a gray layer of haze forms a band that starts above the valley floor and gives way to blue several thousand feet higher.

A car pulls up, and a lone young man from Los Angeles gets out, binoculars proclaiming his purpose. "Any birds up yet?"

"Nope. Not yet. Six yesterday."

\* \* \*

In July, 1981, the Condor Research Center and the U.S. Forest Service asked if I could put together a crew of student volunteers to monitor condor activity from the summit of Mount Pinos. No problem! But did they really want someone on Mount Pinos, or did they want condor data? Reports indicated that condor sightings were few and far between from the summit that year, but we had been having good luck from "The Sign." Maeton Freel, biologist for the Los Padres, whose office was providing a *per diem* allowance and gasoline reimbursement, answered clearly and to the point: "Go where you think you can get the best information, as long as it is within the Forest." And so we stationed students at the sign one at a time for two- to four-day shifts, for 33 consecutive days in August and September, 1981. The observers were within the Forest, though just barely, and they saw condors on 28 of those days.

They assembled information on condor daily activity, movement patterns, and numbers of individuals using the area. Acting on advice from Sandy Wilbur, former U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service condor biologist, they also tried to identify individual birds by using feather gaps and short or broken feathers. They marked diagrams to indicate distinctive characteristics of all birds that came close enough to reveal some, and at the end of the survey we thought we could account for 22 different birds. Then, a snag. Noel Snyder photographed five birds and tried to match them with our diagrams, but there were too many uncertainties. Was that gap really on the left wing, or did the observer mark it wrong? Was the seventh

right primary really short, or was it the eighth? Worst of all, the gaps in the secondaries, or arm feathers, seemed to come and go unpredictably, yet we had relied to a great extent on them. Noel suggested that photographs, and only photographs, could resolve these problems. Our diagrams, however, had revealed one very important thing: the birds in summer and fall all looked somewhat different. Wait until 1982!

\* \* \*

Gayle tries the telemetry at 8:30 and reports a faint signal from AC2, bearing about 210°. He's back in the mountains behind us. No contact with IC1. He's been hanging out in the Sierra the past week. A Red-tail soars up over Juniper Knoll but, failing to gain much altitude, drops down to land on a pinyon snag in the canyon in front of us. No updrafts yet. Our visitor is fascinated with the telemetry, and Tracy fills him in. Tom, our Hawk Mountain volunteer for the summer, pulls up in his bedraggled Volkswagen. Noel has had him back at a nest site watching a condor chick, so we haven't seen him for nearly a week. He reports on the progress of the chick, the flies, the heat, and the boredom (condors feed their young about once a day.) He seems to be glad to get back to people; he's been living on peanut butter for five days. It's not that he didn't have other choices. He *likes* peanut butter.

Seven Ravens are playing in the air turbulence at the head of the canyon to our west. A juvenile Red-tail joins them, and they take turns chasing and stooping on each other. Does the hawk think he's a Raven? The Red-tail takes off north and the Ravens glide down the canyon in front of us. One flips over on his back and glides upside down for a second or two, then rights himself. Why do

they do that? We have come to the conclusion that Ravens simply enjoy flying and showing off. Gayle calls them the "Raven Flying Circus," and that is certainly an apt description. They are very entertaining. We check the eagle's pole, but it is empty. Where did he go? Must have sneaked off to hunt breakfast. Ground Squirrel? Cottontail? Dead calf?

We can feel a slight breeze wafting up the canyon in our faces now. The air over the San Joaquin has been warmed enough to rise and create the deflection currents that make this such a great place to view soaring birds. A golden eagle far out over S-road Hill confirms the suitability of the air. Where are the condors?

The 9 o'clock telemetry is the same story: AC2 to the south, no signal from IC1. A juvenile Cooper's Hawk slips down the canyon in front of us, with Scrub Jays squawking warnings as he passes. At about 9:20 a caravan of six cars pulls up and disgorges an Audubon field trip. "Any birds?"

"No condors yet."

Tom distributes brochures and chats while Tracy hands around the guest book we keep. The 9:30 telemetry check gets a stronger, unvarying signal from AC2, still to the south. Is he coming in? No contact with IC1.

\* \* \*

Our 1982 survey was more intense, more sophisticated than 1981. This time we kept two people, rather than just one, on duty at all times, and we stayed for ten weeks, from July 12 to September 19. Our emphasis was also different: this time we needed to photograph birds on every possible occasion. We were aiming for individual identification of condors, and for as complete an enumeration of the remaining population as possi-

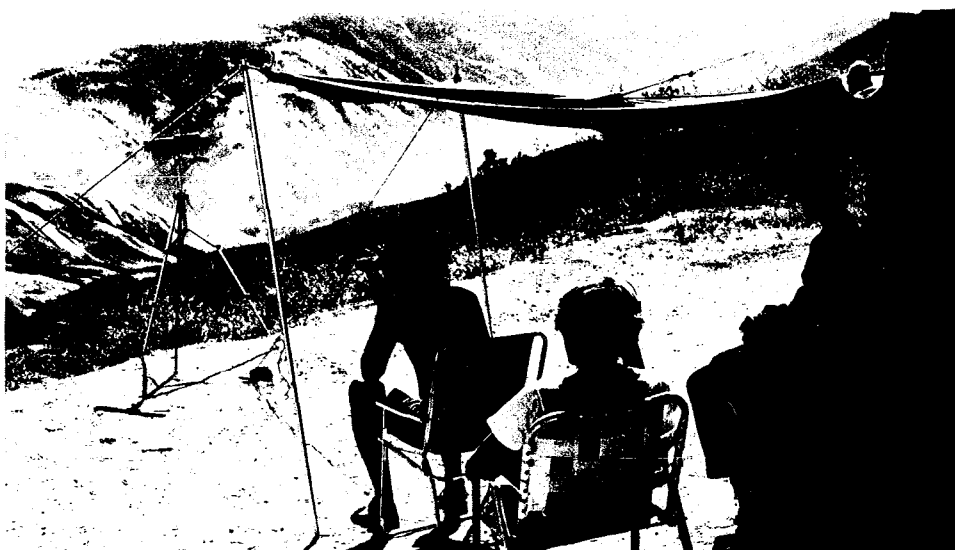


Photo by Eric Johnson

ble. The U.S. Forest Service footed part of the bill, and a grant from the Morro Coast Audubon Society picked up the slack. By the end of those ten weeks we had seen condors every day, and had produced over 100 photographs of condors suitable for individual identification. Personnel at the Condor Research Center had been photographing also, and our combined pictures yielded a minimum of 20 different birds. Allowing for the possibility the some birds might have been missed, Noel put his best estimate at 22½ birds at the end of 1982. I kept asking Noel for photos of that half a condor — we never saw it!

\* \* \*

At 9:43 Tracy announces, in her usual nonchalant manner, "Bird up."

A chorus follows, "Where?"

"Over Fence Hill, right side, bottom of the smog, against the valley. Looks good." Sure enough, there is a speck out there. A check through the 'scope reveals a body suspended beneath long, broad wings. The bird banks, flashes white wing linings.

"Condor!"

A scurry to the other 'scopes, some set up by our visitors. A line of people assembles along the edge of our observation site, all eyes straining through binoculars and telescopes.

"Got it."

"Look at the linings."

"Nice bank."

"You see it yet, Marjie?"

"No. Where are you looking?"

"Head color! Orange. Nice adult."

"Dip — he's heading out."

"I see it."

The condor has the altitude it needs and so, with a single powerful flap of its wings, it sets off on a glide westward. Shortly it disappears behind the hills down in Bitter Creek Canyon. Gayle has checked the telemetry, and reports that it is not one of the radioed birds.

\* \* \*

Why do condors congregate here in the late summer and fall? It's simple really. Food. We are looking over the Santiago Ranch, a 40,000-acre cattle operation, and it is calving time — well, almost. Actually it is about a month before calving, but Epizootic Bovine Abortion, sometimes called foothill disease, causes some of the cows to abort their calves when they are nearly full-term. The rancher's loss is the condor's profit. When actual calving starts, afterbirth appears on the menu as well. I am afraid that the food habits of condors are not nearly as appealing as the birds themselves.

\* \* \*

We discuss the sighting, lament the fact that it was too far to photograph.

"How far was it?"

"About 2½ miles."

"You mean we can see it that well at a distance?"

"Hey — they're big!"

Someone looks straight up, gasps, chokes out, "What's that?"

"Condor!"

"Sneak attack!"

The new bird has come in from the south, from behind us, and is now gliding away to the north on set wings. No photo opportunity here, either. Tracy has grabbed the receiver, and we all hear a loud, insistent, "Beep... beep... beep... beep."

"Guess who? That's AC2." Not a single observer saw his numbered tags or the transmitters mounted on each wing.

\* \* \*

Until the fall of 1982 no one really had a very good idea of the movements of individual condors. Then, as part of the recovery program, two birds were captured and equipped with small, solar-powered radio transmitters. IC1, the first bird so equipped and a male, was an immature when captured, hence the IC, for Immature Condor. AC2, an adult male, was radioed shortly thereafter, and proved to be a member of a breeding pair. John Ogden called me last May to ask if we would be manning "The Sign" this summer. When I answered affirmatively, he requested that we take telemetry readings on the radioed birds. And so this summer we have a receiver, and take half-hourly fixes on them. AC2 is a regular visitor here; his mate and his yearling offspring are also frequently seen and photographed from this spot. Free family portraits, folks, get 'em while they last!

\* \* \*

The condor, our second for the day, disappears into Bitter Creek Canyon. We suspect there is a carcass down there somewhere out of view. People settle down, gather in small groups, chat with us, read brochures, ask about the recovery program. A silver pick-up truck drives up, pulling to within a foot of my legs. A grinning, cowboy-hatted head pokes out, says, "Don't you people have anything better to do? Boy, I wish I had your job. Tell you what, you go push cattle and I'll sit here on my backside and birdwatch."

He's teasing. It's Jim, the foreman of the ranch, and he knows what we are doing. In fact he and his wife Kathy have virtually adopted us all. True, Jim was skeptical three years ago. He was used to dealing with trespassers and poachers; the idea of people sitting at the edge of the property he patrols just to watch birds was novel, if not downright suspicious. But Jims likes the wildlife, too, and he knows condors well. We have something in common. We even gave him a field guide for Christmas. He carries binoculars, but he doesn't use them much because he doesn't need to — the man has at least seven-power eyes! Jim, his wife, and three-year-old daughter Amanda treat us like family, feed us frequently, keep the telemetry batteries charged for us, and in gen-

eral show us incredible hospitality. They are from the South, and their draws blend well with California Cowboy. Jim is rough, tough, mean, and (he wouldn't like this) an absolute sweetheart who would give his last dime to a friend who needed it. Just don't trespass or poach — his .357 magnum pistol is not simply for looks. Kathy is pregnant, and we all hope for a boy. Amanda is a sweet little girl, a real looker, coy, the apple of her dad's eye — so now we all feel Jim needs a son. (Or do we want a son for us?)

"What are you up to?"

"I've got to meet Richard down in the low country. We're moving some yearlings."

"Don't work too hard."

"Hell, I'd work a lot less if I had your job!"

He backs the truck onto the pavement and heads down the road in the direction he came from. A lot of Jim's job is solitary work, and he will tell you he doesn't like people much. That's why he checks on us sometimes two or three times a day, right? We think one of the reasons we get along so well is that we have so little in common. You figure it out.

Someone from the Audubon group asks, "Is it time for the 10:30 condor?"

He gets my standard reply: "Hey, the only thing predictable about these birds is their unpredictability!"

I guess that's not entirely true. Generally the hours from 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM are best.

Our eyes are now augmented by about twenty other pairs, and the raptors are up in force. We spend a lot of time checking out specks. "No, that's an eagle. Wings are too long, too much tail. I got a flash of white on the tail when it turned — it's a juvenile."

"Four birds soaring over Scar."

"Ravens. Swept-back wings. From here, condors would look a lot bigger."

"Two birds up over Valle Vista."

"Look like Red-tails. Too small."

"Two birds way out beyond Bitter Creek, toward the top of the smog."

"Condors."

The two adults we saw previously have apparently joined up, and are climbing in circles. All 'scopes are suddenly occupied again. The birds break out, one after the other, each giving the "double dip" so typical of the species when the birds accelerate into a glide. They do not seem to move very quickly, but in no time at all they are over Oak Knoll, several miles from where they began. I have clocked condors at over 35 mph and John Ogden reports that the telemetry has revealed speeds of up to 80 mph with a tail wind. Our birds have a very flat glide angle, but they stop to soar again and gain more altitude by Oak Knoll, over 4 miles away.

\* \* \*

The students who work on this project are terrific. I've known them all from my

ornithology classes, and they are the cream of the crop. All are Biology or Natural Resources Management majors with career goals oriented toward wildlife and field biology. They have all demonstrated both an eagerness to work on the project and an ability to identify condors at extreme distances. They sure aren't in this for the money — they get expenses paid, that's it. And I wouldn't have it otherwise. No way is anyone going to get rich off condors! We have one coordination meeting of the whole crew before the season starts but after that it's up to them.

I constantly worry about a replacement team not showing up on time, leaving two students in the field with a lot of equipment but no food or water. I shouldn't worry; in three years the survey has gone off without a hitch. Anyway Jim and Kathy would take care of them. So let me mother them a little — I'm proud of this crew, and I'm entitled. Our home base is California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, over 100 miles from "The Sign", so they have a lengthy commute. The road is good, but accidents on it tend to be fatal, head-on collisions. I worry a lot. These are my people, my legacy to the future, my gift to posterity. Hey, world, be good to them! There's a lot of potential in the condor crew. In the past

three years over twenty have done their time here. Experience-wise I guess they would have a hard time finding a more diverse job: photography, telemetry, behavioral observations, public relations, the whole ball of wax. They are really operating an on-site condor visitor center, complete with condors. Try to match that!

\* \* \*

The birds over Oak Knoll are heading east on a glide again. Through the telescopes they waver, shimmer, blink in and out, and are finally swallowed up by heat waves and haze. The telemetry fix has been right on, so we know that AC2 is one of them. IC1 has been giving us a weak signal from the north-northeast, so we suspect he is still in the Sierra. The radios are capable of line-of-sight transmission to over 100 miles if conditions are right. We discover that while we were busy with condors, a few more cars have pulled up. Now a bottle of champagne is being passed around. A young woman from Canada's Northwest Territory has just gotten her life condor, and wants to share the celebration. We pass the guest book around again. Someday this list of condor-watchers may help persuade a planning commission that not only is this country important for condors, it is important to people, too. Over 500 souls repre-

sented 37 states and 8 foreign countries signed last year. We are over 800 visitors this year, but I haven't counted states or countries yet.

One of our pleasures is hearing and transmitting information on rare birds across North America. We get details on the Reef Heron in Massachusetts, the results of the latest of Debbie Shearwater's pelagic trips out of Monterey. Maybe next year we'll post a chalkboard for "Birds Across the Country." We are amazed at how far some people have come to see a condor.

The Audubon trip is getting ready to pull out. Do we know where they can get a LeConte's Thrasher? "Sure. Down to the end of this road, take a right, go through Maricopa and turn right on Cadet Road. Go a block and stop. Everyone this year has reported that the bird pops up and sings at them." It is beyond breeding season, so we do not worry too much about the bird being excessively bothered. We do warn that, as soon as someone leaves the sign, we tend to get close fly-bys of condors. No reason we can see for it, it just happens that way. But they are satisfied, and so depart.

\* \* \*

(to be continued)

## The President's Corner

by Bob Shanman

October. Fall is here. Migration is in full swing. Pumpkins are ripening for Halloween's ghouls and gremlins. But I am writing this in August, and on my way home from work today, there was a report of a cloudburst and flash flood in the local mountains. What was different about this storm? Why did it catch my attention?

Because this one occurred on the Mt. Pinos Highway in Condor Country, and I began to wonder. Where do Condors seek refuge during these storms? Will we lose any in the storm? Two birds have already died this year, leaving only 17 in the wild. The loss of another bird could be devastating to the recovery program.

There are some bright spots in the bird's future. Four more birds were successfully hatched this year in the San Diego Zoo. A pair of adults successfully hatched an egg in a dead tree stump in Tulare County. The U.S. Congress has approved funding for a major Condor habitat land purchase. Up to three birds from the zoo should be released back into the wild next spring. And between the wild and captive populations, there are now about 34 birds. Not bad when you consider there were only about 20 two years ago! The Condor is on the way back.

If the Condors could, I'm sure that they would recognize the support you have given them over the years. National Audubon's Condor Recovery Team has, on many occasions acknowledged your help. The Board of LAAS again thanks you for your past support in the annual Condor Fund Drive. Last year, you, the members, contributed a near record amount of \$3,200 to the program, with the Chapter adding another \$1,300 for a total donation of \$4,500. These funds were directed to additional habitat research.

It is October again. The annual Condor Fund Raising Drive is under way. Can you beat last year's donation? Can we, as a team, in what may be the most significant year so far in the recovery program, get the total to \$5,000? DO YOUR PART! Use the enclosed envelope and send your check in today so that you can continue to see the Condor tomorrow.

### HELP!

Do you like to garden?  
We need several people  
who can volunteer once or  
twice a month to help  
maintain our Memorial  
Garden in Plummer Park.

If you are interested,  
please call Nora Clung  
at 772-3831.

## Renew Your Membership Through LAAS

When you receive your annual renewal notice from National Audubon, we strongly urge that you complete the form and send it along with your dues check to Audubon House rather than directly to National Audubon. National has been having difficulties with the data processing firm handling membership. This has led to many errors in chapter records across the country, including ours. It has also resulted in some of our members missing issues of the WESTERN TANAGER. By sending your renewal directly to us, many of the problems should be avoided.

Before forwarding your renewal to National, we will photocopy your form and check, and make sure that our records are current. By renewing through L.A. Audubon you will be sure not to miss any issues of the TANAGER. We will also be able to confirm that National has placed you in the correct membership category.

We care about your membership, and are willing to make this extra effort to serve you better.

# Conservation Conversation

by Sandy Wohlgemuth



In 1804, a small party of Americans paddled up the Missouri River through Sioux country. The leader wrote, "... we saw a... level plain stretching to the south as far as the eye could reach... the ground was enlivened by herds of antelopes and buffaloe; the last of which were in such multitudes, that we cannot exaggerate in saying that at a single glance we saw three thousand of them before us." This was Capt. Meriwether Lewis in his journal of the daring expedition he and Capt. William Clark led into the vast Louisiana Territory, just acquired by the fledgling United States. He writes of deer and hawks, elk and wolves, porcupines and rattlesnakes. And "... large quantities of different kinds of plovers and brants... in this neighborhood, and seen collecting and moving towards the south..."

In 180 years there have been some alterations in the scenery and the cast of characters. The hundreds of Indian tribes that were met on the plains and in the forests (and carefully described by the explorers) have been reduced to a tiny handful. The transparent streams have lost much of their clarity. Wheat and corn have replaced the endless grasslands of the Middle West. The buffalo and the wolves are long gone and the surviving wildlife have retreated to whatever undeveloped areas remain. Ducks and geese and shorebirds nest in the prairie sloughs and potholes of the mid-continent, and when these wetlands were drained for cultivation a serious habitat problem arose. Responding to the efforts of duck hunters and nature lovers, state and federal refuges were established, relieving the pressure on birds and other creatures.

Over ten years ago in North Dakota — probably the most productive waterfowl area in the lower 48 states — a gargantuan irrigation project was initiated: the Garrison Diversion Unit. This is a \$1.2 billion Bureau of Land Management plan that would destroy 43,000 acres of native prairie and rangeland, 60,000 acres of prairie wetlands and flood or badly damage twelve national wildlife refuges. It would turn 142 miles of streams into irrigation channels. Part of the water discharged from the irrigated land would flow north, violating our treaty with Canada, polluting the Hudson Bay watershed and producing unacceptable losses to Canada's lucrative commercial fisheries. And will this massive sacrifice of land and treasure serve the majority of the people of

North Dakota? It will irrigate 250,000 acres of farmland, about six-tenths of one percent of the cultivated land in the state. The arithmetic comes to close to three-quarters of a million dollars per farm benefited.

For more than ten years National Audubon has led a tenacious fight against Garrison. Each year a new bill appears in Congress asking for more money to continue construction. The House has frequently voted to kill further funding but the Senate has always restored the funds. Both North Dakota Senators are on the powerful Appropriations Committee. Each year anti-Garrison letters from all over the country flood Congress and, in recent sessions, the vote has been very close. In 1983, before a House committee, Audubon President Russell Peterson, after testifying briskly against the project, said, "We believe it is time to conduct a hard, objective review of Garrison." This was a new turn of events. The fact that 15% of the project was already completed, with millions already sunk into dams and canals, made it quixotic to continue calling for complete abandonment of Garrison. Audubon asked for a moratorium on all construction until a fresh examination could be made of possible alternatives. That is exactly what happened this year.

A compromise was reached between National Audubon and the North Dakota senators. The 1985 fiscal year appropriation of \$53 million was approved but cannot be spent until January 1st. (The fiscal year begins October 1984.) The Secretary of the Interior, William Clark, is to appoint a 12-member commission that will review the entire project. They will have to consider all aspects of Garrison: the environmental threat, North Dakota's genuine water requirements, the Canadian question, the American taxpayers' burden. The commission has until the end of this year to make its recommendations. Eight members are a majority. The calibre of commission members, of course, is a primary concern. It is clear that an objective, well-qualified commission is essential if a fair compromise is to be achieved. National Audubon, among others, will make suggestions to the Secretary for appointments to the panel. It is to be hoped that the Administration's pro-development tendencies will be moderated in this instance. (By the time this issue of the Tanager is in your hands the commission should be at work. We're keeping our fingers crossed.)

Two years ago National Audubon commissioned an engineering study which demonstrated that irrigation in North Dakota could be accomplished without polluting Canadian rivers while saving 88% of the state's wetlands. And for far less money. Using the dams and canals already begun or in place, we can hope that the new commission will recommend changes in the present blueprint of the Garrison Diversion Unit that will approach the goal of the Audubon study.

Audubon chapters throughout the nation — including Los Angeles Audubon — have generated thousands of letters to Congress about Garrison. This latest development toward compromise is indeed a significant change in environmental politics. It is not a retreat but a victory. Audubon has not given up on its adamant opposition to the original concept of Garrison. If the new commission rubber-stamps that concept we're back to square One and the struggle will continue. It didn't just happen. It was not only the persistence of National Audubon but the effect of grassroots pressure on our representatives in Washington that produced this compromise. In the short run, the compromise has prevented the loss of the Shesha Lake National Wildlife Refuge and the Kraft Slough wetlands which were slated to be inundated this year. With a large order of luck and constant vigilance we may permanently save a lot more. Lewis and Clark would approve.

## WESTERN TANAGER

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# Birds of the Season

by Hal Baxter  
and Kimball Garrett

**B**irding efforts in southern California in late July and early August were hardly of Olympian magnitude. There were no new world, state or county records, and the Gold medal for best bird must contain an asterisk in the record breaking books, since the identity of this bird (see below) is still being debated. Birders attending the Opening Ceremonies (for example, Jerry Johnson) were able to get "up close and personal..." with a couple of **Chimney Swifts** which were constantly foraging around the Los Angeles Coliseum; these swifts (up to five) were still present as of mid-August. Another Olympic event at the Coliseum was the "Black Witch Moth catch" performed by a team of **American Kestrels**. Throughout early August kestrels were deftly catching these giant Mexican moths (*Otosema odora*; wingspan up to seven inches) around the stonework of the stadium. Black Witch moths undergo a regular late summer migration northward from Mexico, and this summer's movement was among the largest on record according to entomologist Julian Donahue of the L.A. County Natural History Museum.

As for the Gold Medalist mentioned above... A call on 24 July brought word of a **Cook's Petrel** at the north end of the Salton Sea — the most bizarre chapter yet in the strange saga of the Sea in 1984. The bird was seen off and on, sometimes at rather close range, until 29 July. Its discoverers, Steve Cardiff and Donna Dittmann, identified it as *Pterodroma cookii*. This identification was based on a combination of field marks and on probability: the only small, "light-hooded" *Pterodroma* documented for California is Cook's. The situation is complicated, however, by the potential occurrence of two very similar petrels: Pycroft's (*Pterodroma longirostris pycrofti*, presently regarded as conspecific with the Stejneger's Petrel), and Mas a Tierra or Defilippe's Petrel (*P. defilippiana*, formerly regarded as conspecific with the Cook's Petrel). Neither of these forms is known to migrate to the North Pacific, but our present state of knowledge of the non-breeding distribution of petrels is certainly not complete enough to rule out that possibility. The key seems to be the presence of white sides to the tail of Cook's; descriptions of the present bird are conflicting. Whether the bird's identity is eventually determined or not, this is certainly a very interesting record. As

a footnote, we should add that the other tubenoses recorded in the early summer at the Salton Sea (see the September *Western Tanager*) have not been seen again.

Because of the unfortunate cancellation of the 12 August pelagic trip out of San Pedro, we are left somewhat in the dark as to the status of "pelagic" species away from the Salton Sea. There are reports of several dozen **Buller's Shearwaters** in the channel between Ventura County and Santa Barbara Island — a large number of birds at an early date. John Keenleyside, visiting from Ontario, Canada, saw a **Black-footed Albatross** in the Catalina Channel on 25 July (from the Catalina Steamship). Two **Black Storm-Petrels** were seen just off the mouth of Malibu Lagoon on 16 August (Kimball Garrett).

As expected, small numbers of **Magnificent Frigatebirds** were seen at the Salton Sea, e.g., one at the north end on 26 July (Brian Keelan, Jim and Ellen Strauss) and two there the next day (Hal Baxter *et al.*, with four apparently there later in the day). There were, however, virtually no frigatebird sightings along the coast. **Wood Storks** staged their annual post-breeding influx to the Salton Sea, with 100+ near Red Hill on 11 August (Larry Norris). A **White-faced Ibis** was seen at Piute Ponds near Lancaster on 21 July (Jerry Johnson). **California Condors** continued to be seen daily at "The Sign" along Mil Potrero Hwy. in late July and August, monitored by Eric Johnson and his students from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. Jacob Szabo experienced a real birding high: a **Northern Goshawk** flying over the summit of Mt. Whitney in late July.

An alternate plumaged adult **Semipalmated Sandpiper** was at the Piute Ponds near Lancaster on 5 August (Brian Keelan), and a juvenile was found the same day at Bolsa Chica (Doug Willick). Two juveniles were along the Los Angeles River channel in Long Beach 11-13 August (Brian Daniels), and another juvenile was on the Edwards Air Force Base oxidation ponds (Kern Co.) on 18 August (Matt Heindel, Jon Dunn). Small numbers of **Baird's Sandpipers** were noted at the usual shorebird spots in August, with a high count so far of eight at the Lancaster Sewage Ponds on 15 August (Hal Baxter). The first **Pectoral Sandpiper** reported was at Piute Ponds on 11 August (Bruce Broadbooks). Thirty-eight alternate-plumaged **Stilt Sandpipers** were at the south end of the Salton Sea on 17 July (Bruce Broadbooks), and twelve were noted at the north end by Bill Smith of Massachusetts on 5 August. A molting adult was along the Los Angeles River Channel in Long Beach on 7 August (Brian Daniels). Exceptionally early was a juvenile **Long-billed Dowitcher** near Lancaster on 18 August (Jon Dunn *et al.*); hundreds of adults were also present, but juveniles are not normally noted until the second week of September. An unprecedented inland **Elegant Tern** was discov-



ered by Brian Daniels and Doug Willick at Lake Elsinore on 18 August, but it could not be refound the next day.

**Common Ground-Doves** continued to be seen in small numbers in Brian Daniels' neighborhood in eastern Long Beach, with at least one adult male and one immature bird present. Brian also had an out of range ground-dove up the coast at Hermosa Beach. A treat for Orange County listers was a **Black Swift** high in the Santa Ana Mountains on 18 August (Brian Daniels and Doug Willick). Also in Orange County was a pesky **Red-eyed Vireo** at the Turtle Rock Nature Center from 25 July through at least 6 August (Doug Willick). A stray **Lucy's Warbler** was at Turtle Rock on 4 August (also Doug W.). The Los Angeles River in the Sepulveda Recreation Area near Encino hosted large numbers of transient **Lazuli Buntings** and at least half a dozen **Blue Grosbeaks** in mid-August. Also noted along the river channel here was a pair of **Red Bishops** (*Euplectes orix*), an African weaver finch popular as a cage bird and frequent as an escapee. Birders are cautioned that the female bishop is an uncanny lookalike of a Grasshopper Sparrow! Closing out our abbreviated list of landbird sightings is Jon Dunn and Bruce Broadbooks' discovery of nine **Red Crossbills** in planted trees at Mayflower County Park in Blythe, along the Colorado River — an amazing time and place for crossbills, which seem to defy prediction with their movements. Kenn Kaufman tells of similar occurrences of crossbill flocks in the Arizona lowlands late this summer, concurrent with the species' disappearance from the high mountains.

One could write pages extolling the exciting birding potential of the month of October. Needless to say, it will pay to be in the field as much as possible during this month, carefully recording the birds seen and painstakingly documenting unusual occurrences. This October California bird-watchers have a very special new piece of literature to consult: Phil Unitt's *Birds of San Diego County* (Memoir 13, San Diego Society of Natural History). While the work deals only with San Diego County, its far-reaching discussions of subspecies are applicable to a much wider area. These subspecies accounts, the most in-depth for this region in decades, should be required reading for all birders interested in the complexities of southern California bird distribution.

Send any interesting bird observations to:

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Arcadia, CA 91006  
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# CALENDAR

## CALL THE TAPE!

Before setting out for any field trip,  
call the Audubon Bird Tape

**(213) 874-1318**

for special instructions or last-minute  
changes that may have occurred by  
the Thursday before the trip.

**MONDAY, OCTOBER 1 — Malibu Lagoon to McGrath State Beach.** Ed Navojosky will lead his 13th famous annual jaunt up the coast. Meet at 7:30 a.m. in the parking area behind the market, across the street from the Malibu Lagoon entrance. Bring picnic lunch for stop at Big Sycamore.

**SATURDAY, OCTOBER 6 — Santa Barbara.** Reserve a fun day with superb birder **Jon Dunn**. We'll start early to view migrants, shorebirds and perhaps even a rarity! Maximum participants: 20; \$20 per person.\*

**TUESDAY, OCTOBER 9 — Evening Meeting at 8 p.m. in Plummer Park.** Eric Johnson, director of the **Condor Project**, will describe and illustrate his four years of studying condors in the wild, and discuss the present status of the birds. (See lead article this issue)

**SATURDAY, OCTOBER 13 — Join Jean Brown** at 8 a.m. at the **Placerita Nature Center** and we'll bird our way to Walker Ranch, about 2 miles. Backpack your picnic lunch. Take Antelope Valley Fwy (14) north to Placerita; go right about 2 miles to entrance on right.

**SUNDAY, OCTOBER 14 — Join Bob Shanman** (545-2867 after 6 p.m.) for his monthly walk in the unique **Ballona Wetlands**. Ducks, shorebirds, gulls, terns and other water birds will be in evidence. Take Marina Fwy (90) west to Culver Blvd; turn left to Pacific Ave., then right to bridge at end. Meet at 8 a.m. (\$3 parking fee)

**THURSDAY, OCTOBER 18 — Meet Sandy Wohlgemuth** at the Tapia parking lot at 8 a.m. for a half day of varied birding (migrants, residents and shorebirds) at **Tapia Park** then **Malibu Lagoon**. Tapia is located on Las Virgenes/Malibu Cyn. Rd. about half way between 101 Fwy and Pacific Coast Highway.

**FRIDAY, OCTOBER 19 —** Deadline for December Western Tanager. Send Material to Editor, Dexter Kelly c/o Audubon House.

**SATURDAY, OCTOBER 20 —** Photographic Seminar: see announcement this issue.

**SUNDAY, OCTOBER 21 — Whittier Narrows Reg. Park.** See diverse habitats and birds (migrants, waterbirds, residents) with **David White**. Meet at 8 a.m. at the Nature Center, 1000 Durfee Ave., So. El Monte, near crossing of freeways 60 and 605.

**SATURDAY, OCTOBER 27 —** Join **Brian Daniels** for a morning at **Huntington Central Park**. We'll be looking for migrants, returning winter birds and possible vagrants. Take Fwy 405 south to Golden West and go south to Slater; turn left to first parking lot. Meet at 8 a.m. by the swings.

**SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 3 —** See a wide variety of shorebirds with the **Amigos de Bolsa Chica** at the diminishing **Bolsa Chica** wetlands. Birding walks start periodically from 9 a.m. with the last at 10:30 a.m. Picnic facilities available across the street at the State Beach or nearby Huntington Central Park. It is worth a visit to the nearby Sea Cliff shopping center to see their unique and beautiful handling of a shorebird motif. (Their famous "Running is for the birds" 10K run will be held 10/20; also a 5K walk or run; for more info 714-897-7003.) Take Fwy 405 south to Bolsa Chica and continue south to Warner; turn right to PCH, then left to parking lot about middle of Ecological Reserve.

**SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 4 —** Meet **Gerry Haigh** at 8 a.m. for a morning walk in **Topanga State Park**. Look for resident chaparral birds and late fall migrants. From Topanga Cyn. Blvd. make a sharp east turn uphill on Entrada Dr. (7 mi. so. Fwy. 101); continue bearing left at each road fork to entrance (\$2 parking fee)

**WEEKEND, NOVEMBER 10-11 — Morro Bay.** Reserve a special weekend with the marvelous **Kimball Garrett**. We'll view shorebirds and waterfowl, look for Peregrines and late fall and winter vagrants, and do some owling Saturday night. Depending on timing, we may make some birding stops in the San Luis Obispo area enroute home. Maximum participants: 20; \$20 per person.\*

### Some Future Trips:

|                |                                       |
|----------------|---------------------------------------|
| Wed., 11/28    | Pt. Mugu — Leader TBA                 |
| Sat., 12/1     | Carrizo Plains by bus —<br>Leader TBA |
| Sun., 1/6      | Lake Norconian —<br>Pat & Paul Nelson |
| Sat., 1/12     | Santa Barbara — Paul Lehman           |
| Sat., 2/2      | Pt. Mugu — Leader TBA                 |
| Weekend, 6/1-2 | Death Valley — Larry Norris           |

### Some Forthcoming Events:

Sat., Dec. 15 — Antelope Valley Christmas Bird Count  
Sun., Dec. 16 — Malibu Christmas Bird Count  
Sun., Dec. 30 — Los Angeles Christmas Bird Count

### High Tides (over 6')

Oct. 23-27 7:53 a.m. to 10:15 a.m.  
Nov. 20-25 6:47 a.m. to 9:50 a.m.  
Dec. 7-10 7:43 a.m. to 9:21 a.m.  
Dec. 21-24 7:37 a.m. to 9:39 a.m.

**CARPPOOLING:** As conservationists, let's try to reduce gas consumption and air pollution whenever possible. In sharing costs, remember that a typical car journey costs 20¢ a mile.

**\*RESERVATION POLICY:** Priority will be given to those including ALL the following criteria in their trip request. (1) Event desired; (2) Names of people in your party; (3) Phone numbers — (a) usual and (b) evening before event, in case of emergency cancellation; (4) Check to LAAS for exact amount for each event, unless fee not required; (5) Self-addressed stamped envelope for confirmation and associated event information. Send to: Reservations Chairman Ruth Lohr, LAAS, 7377 Santa Monica Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90046.

If there is insufficient response, the event will be cancelled two weeks prior to the scheduled date (4 weeks for pelagics) and you will be so notified and your fee returned. No refunds during these periods unless there is a paid replacement.

If you desire to carpool to an event, Ms. Lohr (usually in office on Tues.) can provide information for you to make contact and possible arrangements.

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### **Bird & Wildlife Seminar with Herb Clarke & Arnold Small**

*Date: October 20, 1984  
Time: 8:30 am to 4:30 pm  
Registration: \$20.00 per person  
Reservations required  
Coffee, tea, and pastries  
will be served*

*To register, send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to PHOTO SEMINAR L.A. Audubon, 7377 Santa Monica Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90046 by October 15, 1984. Sorry, NO registration, at the door.*

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