Killing of Acorn Woodpeckers Remains an Enigma

More than eight months ago we got word that Rossmoor had been issued a permit by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to kill up to 50 Acorn Woodpeckers that were damaging buildings within Rossmoor. We quickly put together a team headed by Diana Granados to try to get the depredation permit stopped. We met with officials at Rossmoor, we brought in experts, the media was all over the issue, letters, calls, hours of time spent and so much more. This issue of the Quail will bring you up to date as to where we are. It is not over yet, even though we have had setbacks. Please read about the issue.

Here is the press release issued by Audubon California. Also, here is a response to questions we asked the Department of Agriculture, from Gail Keirn, Public Affairs Specialist for Wildlife Services. An unsolicited response was also received by Audubon California and MDAS from Ellen Paul, Executive Director of The Ornithological Council. This organization, based in Washington, DC, is associated with the American Ornithologists’ Union and other groups. The purpose of her letter is to assure us that the USDA Wildlife Services “researchers are of the highest caliber, and that their ethics are beyond reproach.” We do not have space here for that letter, but you may contact the Quail Editor for a copy, if you wish.

Audubon California, June 1. As a federal permit allowing homeowner groups in the Northern California community of Rossmoor to shoot Acorn Woodpeckers expired this past weekend, conservation advocates who had opposed the killing might have had cause to celebrate.

However, the expiration of the permit came just as news that a separate federal agency has trapped 20 woodpeckers from the Rossmoor area for scientific purposes.

“The killing of Acorn Woodpeckers in Rossmoor is something that should never have been approved in the first place, and this news about trapping is shocking,” said Graham Chisholm, executive director of Audubon California. “Over the last several months, scientific experts have concluded that killing these birds will not achieve the intended purpose, and it is clear that the public doesn’t approve of this flagrant abuse of native wildlife.”

Homeowner groups in Rossmoor initially obtained the depredation permit to shoot up to 50 Acorn Woodpeckers that had been causing damage as they built their granaries in the sides of buildings. At least 22 woodpeckers had been shot by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Wildlife Services before representatives from Audubon California and Mt. Diablo Audubon began working with the homeowner groups to find other alternatives – and made several substantial offers of assistance that would have avoided the need for lethal remedies.

In January, the homeowners declined the assistance and vowed to move ahead with plans to shoot birds. This prompted Audubon California to begin a broad campaign both at the legislative and administrative levels, as well as in the media. At the prompting of Audubon California, thousands of activists sent letters to the Service or signed the online petition. This outcry led to a voluntary cessation of shooting so that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service could evaluate the situation, and on May 3 the permit quietly lapsed. However, U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Wildlife Services, the agency that had been charged with carrying out the original killings, received permission from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service for the live collection of 20 woodpeckers from the Rossmoor area for their research purposes. Details of the study have not been released and Audubon California was not made aware of this new twist in the issue until late last week. It is likely that once...
sound, environmentally safe, and socially responsible. Approximately 75 percent of NWRC’s research budget is devoted to the development of nonlethal tools and techniques, such as scare devices, repellents, wildlife contraceptives, and vaccines. Studies to develop and evaluate these tools often require the capture of wild animals.

NWRC scientists have a long history of conducting research to develop nonlethal methods to mitigate problems associated with woodpeckers and other bird species. A formal protocol for our planned acorn woodpecker study was initiated in December 2008 and finalized in January 2009. Our 2009 California Scientific Collecting Permit (issued February 11, 2009) states that “Take from populations where depredation is occurring is preferred; e.g. Walnut Creek, CA.” Based upon this preference stipulated in our collecting permit and discussions with the WS State Director in California (February 2009), the decision was made to capture birds for our study at the Rossmoor retirement community near Walnut Creek.

NWRC scientists, with the help of WS Operations field specialists, live-captured 20 acorn woodpeckers from the Rossmoor community in late May. Capture was delayed until after documented egg laying dates by acorn woodpeckers in this region. Care was also taken to not remove birds observed feeding young or sitting on eggs. The birds arrived at the NWRC in Fort Collins, Colorado, on May 27.

The birds will be used to evaluate the effectiveness of several deterrent calls for use in a nonlethal electronic deterrent device. The device is meant to prevent damage to utility poles and other structures. The birds are housed in both indoor and outdoor aviaries and are under the care of our Attending Veterinarian. Our research is conducted under strict scientific protocols and quality assurance standards. Results from this study, as well as others conducted by NWRC scientists, are published in peer-reviewed journals, usually within 1-2 years of a study’s completion.

Under provisions of our 2009 California Scientific Collecting Permit (#SCP-10561), we will euthanize the birds upon the completion of the study. Since these woodpeckers are housed in outdoor aviaries, we cannot ensure their isolation from other species or pathogens during the course of our study. Therefore, releasing the birds back into the wild is not allowed under our permit. If possible, we will use these birds in additional studies, thus alleviating capture of additional birds from the wild.

We empathize with the concerns of both the homeowners who are economically impacted by the woodpeckers and those who wish to protect the birds from harm. Our goal is to develop new methods to help resolve conflicts, such as the one in Rossmoor, and provide wildlife managers and homeowners with additional options in the future.
Any City That’s Smarter Than a Beaver…

...can keep a beaver. At least that’s what supporters keep telling the city of Martinez. In 2006 a pair of breeding adults took up residence in the downtown Alhambra Creek. Fearing the worsening of an already daunting flood problem, the city called for their extermination in 2007. In the face of huge public outcry, they secured permission from Fish and Game to relocate them. Residents, however, wanted the beavers to stay.

Impossible? A beaver subcommittee was formed to address challenges and solutions. Its first act was to hire Skip Lisle of Vermont, inventor of the “beaver deceiver”, who installed a flow device to regulate dam height. The subcommittee issued its report to the council, and six of the seven members advocated for responsibly allowing the beavers to remain. Faced with national media, and unrelenting concerns of property owners along the creek, the council declined to vote on the matter.

That was a year ago, and during that time the city dredged much of their habitat and spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to build a sheet pile wall that passed through the beavers lodge. Beaver supporters (and many taxpayers) called the action unnecessary, but when it was done, Martinez was left with a bank of metal, a safer floodplain, and a family of healthy, slightly irritated, beavers.

Beavers are a keystone species and have a tremendous impact on the land they cultivate. Their changes to the habitat increase wildlife, improve water quality, and actually foster a greater density and variety of migratory song birds. Recently beavers have been praised as a solution to some of the damaging watershed effects of climate change. There are literally hundreds of reasons for Martinez to keep its beavers, but perhaps the most compelling is the impact this colony has had on its beavers, but perhaps the most compelling is the impact this colony has had on the effects of climate change. There are literally hundreds of reasons for Martinez to keep its beavers, but perhaps the most compelling is the impact this colony has had on the Quail...
Summer is now here and we have two more field trips to complete our year’s calendar. After 43 trips and many wonderful bird sightings, it is time to thank the 16 leaders who have taken us out into the Greater Bay Area and beyond. Thank you to all for your great efforts.

It is now time to start planning the upcoming calendar of field trips. Do you have any ideas where we might find new birds? Are we not going to your favorite birding spot? The field trips take us to many diverse areas, from the coast to the Central Valley to the Sierra Nevada. Come and join us at Jean Richmond’s home in Alamo the evening of July 15. Find out what other exciting areas we can visit. We will meet at 7 pm, light refreshment will be provided. Call Jean (837-2843) or Hugh (935-2979) for further details or to leave new ideas.

Trip Reports

Del Puerto Canyon, April 21. It was a hot day for a drive up Del Puerto Canyon, but 19 members made the trip, seeing great birds and flowers along the way. Altogether 60 species were seen or heard. Right off the bat the day started with a Merlin, a seemingly late-in-the-year bird. We added four wrens, including both Canyon and Rock Wrens, Cedar Waxwings, Greater Yellowlegs, Green Heron, Costa’s Hummingbird, Lawrence’s Goldfinch, Lewis’s Woodpecker, Rufous-crowned Sparrow and three blackbird species. The ice cream and cold drinks at The Junction were a welcome treat. But the strawberry shortcake given to us at the lunch stop at the campground just past Frank Raines Park was the best. A great thank you to the San Joaquin Stanislaus Cattlewomen’s Association for that one. We were lucky the birds and strawberries made up for the oppressive heat.

Hugh B. Harvey

Mines Road, April 18. ’Twas the 18th of April in 2009, it was hotter than blazes and we went birding anyway. Despite the heat, we had 74 species while birding from Murietta’s Well to Del Valle Regional Park to The Junction and San Antonio Valley Road. We started with nesting Great Horned Owls, Eurasian Collared-Doves, Yellow-billed Magpies and a Black-headed Grosbeak. At Del Valle we had Spotted Sandpiper, Common Merganser, White-throated Swift, Belted Kingfisher and numerous swallows. Mines Road itself was fairly birdless, but we did find Lewis’s Woodpeckers beyond The Junction as well as Tri-colored Blackbird. What a surprise it was when we completed our checklist and counted our total, not bad for the oppressive heat.

Hugh B. Harvey

Mitchell Canyon, April 30. Twenty-nine members and guests spent a beautiful morning at Mitchell Canyon. The weather was fair, with temperatures in the 55 to 65-degree range, puffy white clouds and gentle

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Welcome New Members
Mindy Brooks Martinez
Michael Corwin Menlo Park
Hannah Craddick Diablo
Lori Fujimoto Moraga
Vicki Lee San Pablo
Joan Mancuso-Adair Walnut Creek
Donna Preece Danville
Ted Robertson Walnut Creek
Nona and Bill Thomas Walnut Creek
Thomas Verrill Pittsburg

Trip Reports
» Continued from Page 4

breezes. 49 species were seen or heard. Highlights were: Wild Turkey (displaying males), Golden Eagle, Prairie Falcon while still in the parking lot, Hairy Woodpecker, Olive-sided Flycatcher easily visible in telescopes, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Bushtit and nest, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, California Thrasher singing on a bush at the top of a hillside of chapparal, Yellow Warbler, Black-throated Gray Warbler, Townsend's Warbler, and Western Tanager.

Maury Stern
Mount Diablo, May 6. Ten members and guests birded Mount Diablo starting at the south gate entrance and on up to Juniper campground. The day was rather quiet as far as birds. A few of our stops produced not a single bird heard or seen. The most exciting event of the day was at Rock City. When we parked and got out of our cars we heard coyotes howling. They sounded quite close, so we walked in the direction of the sounds and sure enough a coyote walked ahead of us just 30–40 feet. One of our members took a pretty good photo of the animal with her small digital camera. In all we had 38 species. Maybe half of these were just a single bird heard or seen. Blue-gray Gnatcatchers seemed to be at every stop. As we ended our trip back at the junction for lunch a pair of Golden Eagles soared high above us engaging in mating behavior.

Jimm Edgar

East Contra Costa County, May 9.
Sixteen participants enjoyed a clear and warm, yet breezy day visiting numerous locations throughout East Contra Costa County. Stops included Marsh Creek Trail in Oakley, Jersey Island, Bethel Island and Delta Road in Knightsen. Fifty-eight species were seen or heard and noteworthy birds included: Blue Grosbeak, Black-chinned Hummingbird, Swainson’s Hawk, Yellow-billed Magpie, Burrowing Owl, Great Horned Owl, Bullock’s Oriole, Hooded Oriole, Western Tanager, Black-headed Grosbeak and Western Kingbird. The following birds were observed at nest sites: Great Horned Owl, House Wren, Hooded Oriole, Swainson’s Hawk and Red-tailed Hawk.

Paul Schorr
West Briones, May 14. Nineteen members and guests had a pleasant morning hearing and seeing 46 species at the Bear Valley side of Briones Regional Park. Weather was fair with temperatures varying between 50 and 70. Highlights were: flyover American White Pelicans, Great Blue Herons and Mallard; Lazuli Buntings were numerous and easily seen singing near the tops of bushes and trees. A Warbling Vireo nest was found with singing Hutton’s vireos nearby. From the Seaborg Trail we heard many Wilson’s and Orange-crowned Warblers. Acorn Woodpeckers were in the usual trees at Homestead Valley and the cypresses there had House Wrens, Creepers and numerous Starlings. Ash-throated Flycatchers were seen and heard as well as Pacific Slope Flycatchers. Surprisingly, no Western Bluebirds were seen.

Maury Stern
Sycamore Grove, May 27. The day started warm and only became more stifling, but the eight birders were happy with what they found. Highlights along Sycamore Grove and Arroyo Del Valle in Livermore were Western Tanager, Warbling Vireo, Brown Creeper and many titmouse families. Near the dam for Del Valle Reservoir we heard a California Thrasher and saw a very nice reddish-brown California Kingsnake. We found four Barn Owls in the tank tower on a residential street before continuing to Murietta’s Well for lunch. Here we added Great Horned Owls, Yellow-billed Magpie, Wild Turkey, California Quail and a very vocal American Kestrel. A final stop at milepost 6.2 on Mines Road gave us very satisfactory looks at male and female Phainopeplas. Altogether we found only 44 species on a very warm day, but many were very satisfactory.

Hugh B. Harvey

Observations
By Steve Glover

A female Common Merganser along San Pablo Creek near San Pablo Reservoir on 5/21 was said to be acting “anxious” and could have had a nest nearby (DV). Contra Costa County still awaits its first breeding confirmation for this species.

Fifteen American White Pelicans were noted circling over San Pablo Reservoir on 5/4 (JD) and three more were circling over Briones Regional Park on 6/6 (LL).

A Green Heron was a nice find at the lagoons in Briones Regional Park on 5/18 (S&ST).

A Eurasian Collared-Dove was in suburban Alamo 6/6–7 (JR). It probably won’t be long until this species has colonized open areas throughout the county but there is no hurry.

A pair of nest-building Blue-gray Gnatcatchers was along the Laurel Canyon Road in Tilden Park on 5/10. This species was not detected as far west as Tilden during the breeding bird atlas project (DV).

Two males and a female Phainopepla were at Lime Ridge Open Space near Concord on 5/20 (DW).

A singing Yellow-breasted Chat was found along Dutch Slough, Jersey Island, on 5/27 (MP). This species has never been found at that location but it appears suitable for nesting.

Grasshopper Sparrows were all the rage this season. Up to eight were heard singing at Wildcat Canyon Regional Park on 5/10 (DV), eight more singing males were along the Old Moraga Ranch Trail near St. Mary’s College on 5/31 (JH), and at least two were near the Sindicich Lagoons in Briones Regional Park on 6/6 (LL).

A male Lawrence’s Goldfinch was found along the Oursan Trail near San Pablo Reservoir on 5/21 (JS). We were surprised to find this species so far west during the breeding bird atlas but they apparently are now regular there.

Jay Dodge, Joel Herr, Laura Look, Michael Perrone, Jean Richmond, Judi Sierra, Susan and Steve Taylor, Doug Vaughan
Submit Contra Costa County sightings to Steve Glover at countylines@sbcglobal.net or (925) 997-1112.
Killdeer • Charadrius vociferus

Killdeer are famous for their protective “broken wing” display when a potential predator approaches the nest. The adult bird will fan out its tail, flap one wing, and feign a struggle away from the nest. This behavior will draw attention to itself, and when the intruder is diverted and the young are out of danger, the Killdeer will miraculously recover and scream loudly as it takes flight. If a large animal, such as a deer or cow, approaches, the ruse is not used, as the risk is that of potential trampling of the nest. The bird will then move away from the nest and make a ruckus with flapping wings to distract the animal, or it may even fly in the animal’s face in defense of its young.

As do the zebra’s stripes, the two dark black bands across the pure white breast of the Killdeer demonstrate what is called disruptive coloration; the rings tend to break up the outline of the bird, helping it to meld into the variegated background of its habitat. Two other plovers, Semipalmated and Snowy, have only one band, sufficient to serve as camouflage for these smaller birds. Fledgling Killdeer also have just one band.

Feeding mostly on insects, Killdeer are one of the most beneficial of shore birds. They will run, stop abruptly and stand, then snatch their prey from the ground, or run again and repeat.

The onomatopoetic name imitates the birds’ shrill calls; the scientific genus name derives from Latin words recognizing their loud and persistent cry.

In early May, four Killdeer chicks hatched in a gravel area at Heather Farm Park. Jim Silva discovered the nest and put out orange cones to prevent someone from driving over the invisible nest. This remarkable photo is by Brian Murphy.

Valle Vista Trails

The Summer Tanager found by Tim Howe last summer was a high-light to my Contra Costa Big Year and attracted many birders to the area. Red-naped Sapsucker, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and Gray Flycatcher have also been found here. This is good spot to find Willow Flycatcher, Hermit Warbler and other birds in migration.

I have seen a bobcat kitten in a tree by the bridge. Mountain Lions have been sighted too!

The history of Upper San Leandro Reservoir is of some interest. The village of Contra Costa, in Contra Costa County, grew rapidly during the Gold Rush, and in 1851, with a population of 4000, changed its name to Oakland. Two years later, the County was split to place the town in a new Alameda County. By 1870, San Leandro Reservoir was completed by Anthony Chabot to serve the water needs of the community. In 1926 a second reservoir was added upstream on San Leandro Creek, named Upper San Leandro Reservoir. The original reservoir was later renamed in honor of Chabot.

If you haven’t yet made an acquaintance with Valle Vista and King Canyon, you have a treat awaiting for you when you go.

the Quail

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July–August 2009
A Book for Birders

Suzie Gilbert lives in the Hudson Valley of New York with her family. She began volunteering at a raptor rehabilitation center in 1990 and wrote the children’s book Hawk Hill before opening her home-based bird rehabilitation center, Flyaway, Inc. Trying to raise public awareness about the beauty and mystery of birds, highlight the dangers they face, and suggest ways to help them, she found that the best way to connect people with wild birds is to describe some of the more fascinating facets of their natural histories, then relay facets of their personalities. Most people are astonished to discover that wild birds have personalities as varied as do their friends and family.

She wrote all of this into a book Flyaway: How A Wild Bird Rehabber Sought Adventure and Found Her Wings, published by HarperCollins. Her goal was to show what wild birds are really like—from close, day-to-day observations that reveal both their inner and outer lives. Look for this entertaining memoir at your local book store or online at www.suziegilbert.com.

Birds in Focus

Audubon magazine is launching the 2009 Audubon Magazine Photography Awards: Birds in Focus, created to celebrate the beauty and diversity of birdlife through the art of photography.

Audubon will be accepting submissions online until July 15 in three categories: Professional, Amateur, and Youth. Photographers are encouraged to reveal a new angle or perspective in their work. “Think creatively,” advises Audubon’s design director Kevin Fisher, one of the judges. “Originality and drama rank high at Audubon. Include tight shots, such as close-ups of eyes, feathers. We welcome uncommon perspectives.”

The Award winners will be announced in December and will see their work showcased within the pages of both Audubon and Nature’s Best Photography magazines.

An impressive array of prizes will be awarded, including top-of-the-line photo and optic equipment from award sponsor, Nikon.

- Journey to Peru’s Tambopata National Reserve.
- An ultimate birding safari to Australia’s Northern Territory.
- 14-day Tropical Rivers and Rainforest cruise through South America.
- Opportunity to travel to Honduras with Audubon wildlife photographer Roy Toft as your photographer/guide.
- A Nikon D80 digital SLR camera, 18-55mm NIKKOR VR lens, and a set of Nikon EDG 8x32 binoculars.

For details, visit www.AudubonMagazinePhotoAwards.com

MDAS MEMBERSHIP/RENEWAL APPLICATION

☐ Please enroll my family and me as a member of Mount Diablo Audubon Society for $25 for one year.
☐ I’m enclosing an additional tax-deductible donation of $__________.
☐ For an additional $20 (new NAS members only), please enroll me in the National Audubon Society.

Please send The Quail by: ☐ E-mail ☐ US mail

Name ________________________________________________

Address ____________________________________________

City, State ____________________ Zip________________

Phone ( ____ ) ___________ E-mail ____________________

Please make your check payable to:
MT. DIABLO AUDUBON SOCIETY and mail with this application to:
Membership Chair, 1932 Golden Rain Road #4, Walnut Creek, CA 94595
The trails of East Bay Municipal Utility District (EBMUD) that radiate from the Valle Vista staging area in Moraga are popular with birders. In particular, the King Canyon Trail provides many different habitats and many wonderful views, as it follows—for much of its way—the shoreline of Upper San Leandro Reservoir. The combination of planted Monterey Pines, creekside habitat, madrone/bay covered hillsides, hillside pasture and open water. Nearby redwood forest with marine influence creates a location filled with a nice variety of bird species year round.

But first, you must obtain a permit to use the trail. You can buy a permit ($10 for a year, $20 for two years, or $30 for five years) at EBMUD offices such as at Lafayette Reservoir, or on line at http://www.ebmud.com/services/recreation. Pay by credit card; print out the permit on your computer. The permit is valid for the trails at Briones Reservoir as well.

To reach the Valle Vista trailhead, go south on Moraga Road from Lafayette, or on Moraga Way from Orinda, to Canyon Road in Moraga. Go southwest on Canyon Road for 1¼ miles to the staging area on your left. Sign in at the register and walk downhill on the Rocky Ridge Trail. After a short distance, a marker indicates that Rocky Ridge drops off to the left while Riche Trail continues straight. Riche Trail is a ¾-mile loop that circles to the right and returns you to the parking lot. Rocky Ridge goes through an old plum orchard, then a pine forest; listen for the sounds of woodpeckers and the scuffling of towhees. The trail emerges where a farm lane joins Canyon Road. Cross the bridge and bear to the right. The Rimer Creek Trail, to the left from this point, follows the creek for a short distance, then climbs to the ridge.

As you proceed along the lane, you will find many nesting boxes for Wood Ducks. It stands to reason that you should look for Wood Ducks hereabouts. Soon you come to a junction where King Canyon Trail begins and Rocky Ridge Trail branches to the left and begins its climb. King Canyon trail continues on the dirt road past working farm buildings. Watch for American Kestrels that may be hovering over anticipated prey. Soon you come into view of the reservoir. You’ll almost surely spot Canada Geese on the water, perhaps a Cinnamon Teal.

The trail continues for about three miles along the edge of the narrow lake until it rejoins Rocky Ridge Trail. From here, a short distance will take you to Rancho Laguna Park. Consider stashing a second car here for a one-way excursion.

Last year, Denise Wight did a Contra Costa County Big Year, as reported to Mount Diablo Audubon Society at the February meeting. She adds these notes concerning the Valle Vista trails:

The grassy area just south of the parking seems to create thermals for raptors to ride. In one hour period of just sitting on the hillside, I have seen Golden Eagle, Osprey, American Kestrel, Red-tailed Hawk and Common Raven use this area to gain altitude on warm thermals. Merlin, Peregrine Falcon, and Bald Eagle have

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