March 2004

Golden Eagle to Be Focus of March Meeting

At our March 4 general meeting, we will celebrate the Golden Eagle as well as learn about status in California. Two of our own members, Brian Murphy and Diana Granados, will share their unique experiences with this magnificent bird. Our Birding Information segment will feature a California Energy Commission biologist who will speak on “Avian Mortality in the Altamont Hills Wind Resource Area.”

Brian Murphy’s Eagle Photos

In addition to being a staunch member of MDAS, Brian Murphy is a member of the Walnut Creek Open Space Foundation Board. Due to his interest in his own “backyard,” he has spent years observing and photographing the wild creatures in Contra Costa County. Some of Brian’s photographs have been the basis of Chuck Todd’s illustrations in The Raccoon Next Door, written by Gary Bogue. Brian has spent eight years watching, enjoying, and photographing the Golden Eagles in Shell Ridge Open Space of Walnut Creek. His program will focus on these Golden Eagles that love only 1.5 miles from Heath Farm Park.

According to the UCSC Predatory Bird Research Group, the slopes and valleys of the Diablo Mountains support the highest known density of Golden Eagle nesting territories in the world. In one square kilometer section of oak savanna near Livermore, there are at least 44 breeding territories, or one pair every 19 square kilometers. The open grassland habitats, upslope winds funneled from San Francisco Bay to the Central Valley, the scattering of oaks suitable for nesting, and an abundance of California ground squirrels create ideal conditions for this highly-regarded predator.

Live Golden Eagle Visitor

After Brian has shared his photographs of the Golden Eagles, Diana Granados and Jenny Papka of Native Bird Connections will share their resident Golden Eagle with us. The young, two-year-old bird was found in east Contra Costa County with a permanent wing injury and became a “partner educator” with NBC in 2003.

Native Bird Connections was founded in 2000 to nurture “Respect, Reverence, and Responsibility for the Natural World.” It is a professional organization offering non-releasable birds an opportunity to have working and useful lives in captivity. Diana and Jenny and their staff provide advice and assistance for rescued wildlife and educational presentations for youth and adult audiences.

Diana Granados, founder and director of Native Bird Connections, has 28 years of experience in the fields of education and captive animal management. The NBC curator, Jenny Papka, has 16 years of experience in those two fields. They are an amazing team. It is thrilling to experience their skilled handling and understanding of the magnificent birds in the NBC collection. Join us for a special evening.

Birding Information

Linda Speigel, a wildlife biologist with over 20 years of experience and an employee of the California Energy Commission, will be our speaker for Birding Information. Ms. Speigel will be giving us a summary of research on avian mortality in the Altamont Hills from the wind machines there. She runs the terrestrial resource research program for the Public Interest Energy Research (PIER) Program. This program currently involves wind and bird interactions, bird electrocutions, reducing fuel loading to mimic natural fire regimes, and reducing exotic invasions from transmission line corridor maintenance activities.

Meeting Schedule

The next MDAS general meeting will be Thursday, March 4, in the Camellia Room of The Gardens at Heather Farm, 1540 Marchbanks Dr., Walnut Creek (see map on p. 6).

6:30 p.m.—Doors open
7 p.m.—Birding Information
7:25 p.m.—Business meeting
7:40 p.m.—Social time, refreshments and door prize drawing
8:05 p.m.—Program
Remember your coffee cup!
Spring Arriving Birds Focus of March Field Trips

Elizabeth Dickey, Field Trip Chair

Field trips are open to MDAS members and nonmembers alike. You do not have to be a birding expert; only one who enjoys nature. Bring binoculars, field guides, and lunch. We have a limited number of loaner binoculars available by calling the trip leader at least 7 days in advance. Weather or the availability of leaders may require changes. Trips go in light rain or drizzle. If in doubt, call leader up to 1/2 hour before departure. Carpool time is the departure time. Carpool expense: 20 cents per mile shared among driver and riders; tolls and entry fees are shared equally by driver and riders.

March 3, Wednesday—San Leandro Reservoir. Meet at 8 a.m. at Valle Vista staging area off Canyon Rd. From SR 24 west, take Orinda exit south; in Moraga, turn right on to Canyon Road. Leader: call Elizabeth Dickey (925-254-0486) for more information. Category 2

March 6, Saturday—Capay Valley. Carpool leaves Sun Valley parking lot in Concord at 7:30 a.m. This is a 225-mile car caravan trip to Yolo County. We will be going west of I-505 on SR16 and continue north to SR 20. Possible birds are Lewis’s Woodpecker, Common Mergansers, and Canyon and Rock Wrens, and raptors, including Bald and Golden Eagles. Trip will go in light rain. Leader: call Elizabeth Dickey (925-254-0486) for more information. Category 2

March 11, Thursday—Rockville Park. Take I-80 East to Fairfield; exit at Suisun Valley Road. Follow this north, and turn left at traffic light onto Rockville Road. Take Rockville Rd. straight up about 2.5 miles. The small dirt parking lot will be on the left side. Look for signs: “Rockville Park,” “Park 800 ft. Ahead.” Leader: call Elizabeth Dickey (925-254-0486) for more information. Category 2

March 17, Wednesday—Sycamore Grove-Livermore. Alternate Route 1: From Highway 680 in Alameda County, exit Highway 84 east (from southbound 680 you must exit, cross under the freeway, get back on the freeway, and then exit again). Drive about 6.5 miles east on Highway 84, then turn right onto Holmes. Drive just 0.2 mile, and shortly after the road turns sharply left (becoming Wetmore), turn right into the park. Alternate Route 2: From Highway 580, exit Portola on outskirts of Livermore. Drive south on Portola about 0.5 mile, then turn right onto North L Street. Continue south (North L becomes South L, then Arroyo Road), altogether about 2.2 miles, then turn right onto Wetmore. Drive about 0.7 mile and then turn left into the park. Alternate Route 3: From I-580 eastbound take Santa Rita Rd. south, turn left on Valley Ave., and left on Stanley Blvd. Turn right on Murrietta and right onto SR 84 (Holmes) Continue on Holmes when SR 84 bends to the right. Turn left on Wetmore and look for parking lot on right. This is a new trip to one of the largest sycamore groves in the state. On the way home, we may stop to look at the heron rookery at Shadow Cliffs. Leader: Elizabeth Dickey, 925-254-0486 Category 2

March 20, Saturday—Black Diamond Mines Regional Park. Carpool leaves 7:30 a.m. from the southwest corner of the Sun Valley parking lot. Meet at 8:15 a.m. in the parking lot at Black Diamond Mines park. Go east on Ygnacio Valley/ Kirker Pass Roads; in Pittsburg, turn right on Buchanan Rd. Go east on Buchanan Rd to Somersville Rd. (Antioch) and turn right. Follow the road to the parking lot at the end. Woodland, chaparral, and some grassland birds. Leader: Pat MacEachern, 934-3041 Category 3

March 25, Thursday—Huckleberry Preserve. Meet at 8 a.m. at parking lot on Skyline Blvd. From Hwy 24 westbound, take Fish Ranch Rd, turn left onto Grizzly Peak, and left again onto Skyline Dr. Parking is on left just past Sibley Preserve. Leader: Elizabeth Dickey, 254-0486 Category 2

March 31, Thursday—Skyline Park, Napa. Take I-680 to Benica Bridge; then take I-780 to Vallejo. Go north on SR 29 to SR 121. Turn right on Imola east to park entrance. Parking fee $5. Meet at 8:45 a.m. in first parking lot. Expect Brown Creepers and White-breasted Nuthatch. Bring lunch. Leader: Elizabeth Dickey 254-0486 Category 2
Lindsay Wildlife Museum Trip

Spring Birds at Pfeiffer Big Sur & Molera State Parks

Join Phil and Pat Gordon, Leaders/Guides with decades of successful experience, on a Lindsay Museum-sponsored weekend birding and camping trip. The group will leave from the Lindsay Museum, 1931 First Ave., Walnut Creek, at 8 a.m. on Saturday, March 27, and return on Sunday.

This will be an opportunity to explore some of the birdiest locales in California. Their sojourn will include visits to habitats from coastal shores, rocky near-shore zones, mud and sandy flats, rivers and their riparian galleries, grassy and oak savannas, to oak and redwood woodlands, to name a few.

The historic Big Sur area is also part of the Condor Introduction and Release Program. They will visit the Ornithology Lab and Condor Center supported by the Ventana Wilderness Society to witness their active mist-netting and bird banding program.

The inland venture will be to upper Carmel Valley to the Hastings Natural History Reserve, where the discovery was made regarding social intricacies in family life of Acorn Woodpeckers and Western Scrub-Jays. Their delightful trails will be for our use.

Camping along the Big Sur River drainage in the Park among the Coast Redwoods may also offer some Owling Saturday night. The trip back north, they will visit Moss Landing for another look at the outer coast and the Estuary of Elkhorn Slough and its host of Wintering/Spring arriving birds. FOR MORE INFORMATION: Contact Janine Sidran, Lindsay Wildlife Museum 1(925) 935-1978 or Phil Gordon (510) 538-3550.

Chapter Election

Next month, the MDAS Board will name a Nominations Committee to seek candidates for four officer positions: Chapter president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer. If you are interested in serving on the Nominations Committee, call Mike Williams at 925-798-0303.

Field Trip Reports

Santa Cruz, Saturday, January 17 — Thirteen birders enjoyed a beautiful day in Santa Cruz. We saw a total of 58 species, including three species of cormorants, but missed a target bird, Wood Duck, at Neary Lagoon. —Joel Summerhill

Sunol Regional Park, Wednesday, January 21 — A sunny January day was enjoyed by 10 birders who walked to Little Yosemite. Acorn Woodpeckers were everywhere along the road. A flock of White-throated Swifts was heard and seen high over the hills. We identified 38 species during the trip. — Hugh Harvey.
The highlight of the winter was clearly to a Martinez backyard. The bird was spotted and photographed by Anne and Nikhi never seen again. This appears to be the third record for Contra Costa but male Wilson’s Warbler. As was the case in the past several Hidden Lakes Park, Martinez. At least three birds were seen there on 2/9 (DW). Chipping Sparrows are generally considered to be rare in northern California in winter.

White-throated visitors to Contra Costa County, with most of the records being from backyard feeders. This period brought three reports: ... , GF, JR), and one on 1/30 near Heather Farms, Walnut Creek (HH). One wonders how many are present that we never hear about.

Observers: Nathan Crawford, George The Quail 2 March 2004

The Quail

The American Coot Can Count

All experienced birders have observed and probably dismissed that small, ubiquitous waterfowl, the American Coot. But that familiar marsh bird is not as stupid as its name may imply. A new study found that coots are able to recognize and count their own eggs, even in the presence of eggs laid by other birds.

According to Dr. Bruce Lyon, who studied this species, this talent of this unsung bird is a defense mechanism used by female coots to thwart other coots who lay their eggs in rival nests. Lyon’s findings were published in the April 3, 2003, issue of the journal Nature.

“First, I didn’t believe the results,” said the assistant professor of ecology and evolutionary biology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. “The ability of females to count only their own eggs in a mixture of eggs is a remarkable feat that provides a convincing, rare example of counting in a wild animal.”

Lyon studied hundreds of coot nests in British Columbia during a four-year investigation that was originally designed to study how coot parents care for their chicks, but the focus of his study changed when he discovered high levels of “brood parasitism,” or the practice of one species laying eggs in another species’ nests. Lyon realized that coots were often the victims of this parasitism.

Brood parasitism affected 41 percent of the nests that Lyon studied and accounted for 13 percent of all eggs laid by the study population.

The phenomenon has a serious impact on the coot population, Lyon explained. “Typically about half the chicks in a nest starve to death,” Lyon said. “That explains both the cost of parasitism to the host and the benefit to the parasite.”

But female coots, Lyon says, are good at recognizing and rejecting parasitic eggs. Rejected eggs were buried deep in the nesting material and never hatched.

Lyon examined whether the presence of parasitic eggs affected clutch size because costs lay eggs until an internal cue tells them to stop. Scientists had thought this cue was triggered by a sense of touch, prompted when the female was sitting on the right number of eggs.

“Rejection takes a long time, so the clutch-size decision is made while the parasitic eggs are still in the nest,” Lyon said. “That means they are not using a touch cue. These birds are looking at their nests and counting only those eggs they recognize as their own to make a clutch-size decision.”

The highlight of the winter was clearly the brief visit of a male Black-throated Warbler to a Martinez backyard. The bird was spotted and photographed by Anne and Nikhi Kumaranyagam on 1/12, but within 20 minutes the bird was gone and never seen again. This appears to be the third record for Contra Costa but the first for winter. The previous two records had both been in fall.

Badly overshadowed was an adult male Wilson’s Warbler in a Kensington yard on 1/17. Wilson’s Warblers are extremely rare in the East Bay winter with just a tiny handful of records for Contra Costa County, although the observer saw one at the same spot in 2001 (GG).

As was the case in the past several winters, a small flock of Chipping Sparrows is once again wintering at Hidden Lakes Park, Martinez. At least three birds were seen there on 2/9 (DW). Chipping Sparrows are generally considered to be rare in northern California in winter. White-throated Sparrows are uncommon winter visitors to Contra Costa County, with most of the records being from backyard feeders. This period brought three reports: One on 1/3 in a Moraga yard (SP), one on 1/20 in residential Walnut Creek (MP, GF, JR), and one on 1/30 near Hidden Lakes Park, Martinez (HH). One wonders how many are present that we never hear about.

Observers: Nathan Crawford, George Finger, George Griffith, Hugh Harvey, David Ellis, Edward Jackson, John Marsh, Susan Parr, Marjorie Plant, Jean Richmond, Audrey Riddlebarger, Denise Wight

The Quail

Observations by Steve Glover

A female Wood Duck continued at the unlikely location of Hidden Lakes Farm Park, Walnut Creek, through at least 1/28 (HH). Hooded Merganser remained in increased locally in recent winters, and several reports were again received this period. Four were at Civic Park in Walnut Creek on 1/13 (NC), a pair was at the San Ramon Royal Vista Golf Course on 1/18 (AR), an unknown number were seen again at Civic Park in Walnut Creek on 1/30 (HH), and four were at Hidden Lakes Park, Martinez, on 2/8 (PK). An Osprey was at Mt. View Sanitary District near Martinez on 1/7 (GF, JM). Another or possibly the same bird was at Martinez Regional Shoreline on 1/11 (NC). Ospreys are apparently quite unusual in this particular area although a single bird is found most winters at nearby Mallard Reservoir.

A displaying male Allen’s Hummingbird was at Jewel Lake, Tilden Park, on 1/12 (DH). People are often surprised at just how early Allen’s Hummingbirds, our earliest migrants, can return. This bird was right about on schedule.

Tilden Park’s wintering Yellow-bellied Sapsucker continued to be seen through at least 2/12 (PK).

The Quail

Voted No on Measure N

President’s Notes

by Mike Williams

Many of the measures and propositions on the March 2 ballot will shape the direction of our state and county and deserve our careful consideration. As a conservationist and businessman, one local issue that concerns me greatly is Measure N. After looking at the measure and reading both sides of the story, I joined my fellow MDAS board members in opposing Measure N. I urge you to vote NO on Measure N. Here’s why.

Measure N has been placed on the ballot by the Contra Costa Water District. (If you don’t live in the area served by the CCWD, you will not be voting on the measure.)

The CCWD seeks voter approval to expand the Los Varguros Reservoir to five times its present size—that’s right—five times its present size, making Los Varguros larger than Lake Camaque. Los Varguros #2 will flood an additional 2000 acres of habitat as well as millions of dollars of trails, marinas, and other visitor facilities built with our money by the CCWD. This huge reservoir will cost an estimated $1.5 billion and take 4 to 7 years to complete.

CCWD has put up signs that say a yes vote will provide drought protection for the District’s ratepayers. But that’s misleading. If you go to the CCWD’s own website (http://www.cccwater.com/publications/watersupply.asp), you can find a document entitled Future Water Supply: Study dated 1996. This document published by the CCWD says that in the very worst, prolonged drought at the outer edge of the years covered by the study (2040), the District might be 13,000 acre feet short of water. But the document also states that the District has already purchased the rights to an additional 12,000 acre feet of water. We already have drought protection. The study also recommends three alternatives to take care of drought situations. Not one of the recommended alternatives is expansion of Los Varguros. Another CCWD document, Urban Water Management Plan, dated December 2000, states, “Near-term demands can be met under all supply conditions except in the latter years of a multi-year drought where short-term water purchases in conjunction with a request for up to five percent voluntary conservation would be considered to meet demands.” Here are two documents written by CCWD experts who say we don’t need an expanded reservoir to provide drought reserves for at least the next 45 years.

Let’s look at the dollar costs. In 1988 when CCWD first sought voter approval for funding to build Los Varguros #1—our present reservoir—the District told voters that it would cost $88 million. Then that cost rose to $350 million. The final price tag was $450 million. Los Varguros #2, according to the District’s estimates, will cost $1.5 billion. I don’t have any reason to think that the District has improved its estimate costs.

In order to build Los Varguros #2, the District will have to drain the existing reservoir and tear down the existing dam. The existing dam is 84 years old! The concrete is hardly dry! During the 4 to 7 years of reconstruction and filling Los Varguros #2, we won’t have a reservoir to improve water quality or to protect us in case of a drought—but we will still have our sky-high water rates.

It gets worse. The District wants our approval to proceed with these questionable plans, but they can’t even tell us where the extra 400,000 acre feet of water will go. They say it won’t go to southern California, but we live in a state where water is a commodity and sold to the highest bidder. The District cannot guarantee that this water won’t find its way into a canal heading south.

I’m a businessman and this measure fails the common-sense test. It’s a bad measure badly timed. Vote NO on Measure N.

The Quail

is published 10 times a year by the Mt Diablo Audubon Society. A nonprofit organization dedicated to habitat conservation and environmental education

P.O. Box 53 Walnut Creek, CA 94597-0053 (925) AUD-UBON (925) 283-8266

MDAS Board of Directors

President: Mike Williams, 376-1631
Vice President: Joe Frank, 674-1219
Treasurer: Patrick King, 510-642-5522
Board Secretary: Mike Tischler, 689-5552
Sales Mgr: Barbara Vaughan, 376-8732
Programs: Alice Holmes, 938-1581
Field Trips: Elizabeth Dickey, 254-246
Membership: Ann McGrew, 968-1677
Volunteer Coordinator & Publicity: Shirley Ellis, 938-3707
Hospitality: Gerry Argenal
Education: Cecil Williams, 376-1631
Access: Beverly Havley, 947-0479
Chapter Development: Joel Summerhill, 753-0862
Hands-On Conservation: Nancy Wenninger, 938-7987
Christian Science: Jimin Edgar, (510) 658-2330
Gloria Cannon, Quail Editor
Member-at-Large: Jean Richmond

Gloria Cannon, Editor (925) 751-0862
P.O. Box 8367, Pittsburg, CA 94565
gloriacannon@earthlink.net

March 2004

Northern CA Bird Box:

(510) 658-7422

Please send observations to Steve Glover, 6526 Conestoga Lane, Dublin 94568, or call (925) 828-7793. Please include your phone number with your observation.