



### Birds of the Sutter Buttes Region

All during the month of February I was stationed at Marysville in connection with a pioneering venture in Nature Guiding sponsored by the National Audubon Society of New York and its affiliated societies in California. I took parties out on two-day field trips in a station wagon to observe and study birds and other wildlife. The venture was a success, at least in point of interest, though stormy weather interfered somewhat with enrollment. This is grand birding country. It is rich in species and especially rich in the number of birds to be seen. This "Peach Bowl," "Rice Bowl," "Grain Bowl" area is also a veritable "Bird Bowl." The territory covered extends roughly from the foothills east of Marysville, north to Gridley, south to Robbins and west to Willows. The following items cover some of the interesting species identified by me and my parties during February:

*White Pelican*: At least 100 individuals observed. Always present in Grimes Lake at the Sacramento Wildlife Refuge. Seen at several stations both east and west of Sacramento River.

*Whistling Swan*: Some of these beautiful birds were seen on practically every field trip across the region. Especial observation points were in the fields near Robbins; in the Sutter Basin, just west of the Sutter Buttes; in the rice fields between Arbuckle and Willows; and in the largest pond of the Sacramento Wildlife Refuge. On one day, February 18, more than 200 were counted near Willows. On this day two of us approached to within 200 yards of a feeding flock of 130. At this distance their musical whistle could be plainly heard. To my surprise I found that this large bird whistled upon the same pitch of the scale as that of the Mourning Dove. This would be approximately one octave above middle C. I interpreted the call as saying, "Go away, go away!"

*Geese*: By careful observation seven different kinds of geese could be distinguished in the great flocks and flights observed. Snow Geese were especially numerous toward the southern end of the Sutter Basin near Robbins during the month, although they were present all through the region visited. Whistling Swans were often found associated with these geese. It was noted several times that when the wary geese took flight upon our approach, the swans would remain on the ground as though they disliked the idea of having to fly to escape.

*White-fronted Goose*: This species was closely associated with the Snow Geese both on the ground and in flight. Their presence added an interest of contrasting color to the beautiful sky-writing patterns, especially when seen in flight formation high overhead against the blue sky.

*Ross Snow Goose*: There always seemed to be at least 100 of the larger variety of Snow Geese to one of this smaller size goose.

*Tule Goose*: A close scrutiny of feeding flocks of White-fronted Geese in the Sutter Basin disclosed a number of these dark-bellied, which may be distinguished as Tule Geese.

*Canada Goose*: This species was far outnumbered during the month by the two smaller sub-species. For example, in a census taken by Mr. P. J. Van Huesan

on the Sacramento Wildlife Refuge, February 14, there were only four Honkers as compared with 620 Cackling and 253 Hutchins Geese. It would certainly be safe to say there were 25,000 Hutchins Geese in the Sutter Basin region in February. This goose seemed to be the predominating goose of the lot. When the geese are feeding in rice stubble it takes considerable practice to spot them at any distance. Unless the geese are alarmed into the air an observer on a drive through-out the region might be led to believe there were not many geese present. Fortunately numerous airplanes pass up and down the Sacramento Valley daily. Some are patrolling grain fields as "motorized scarecrows." It turned out that many times during the month I would be safe in saying there were 10,000 geese visible in the air at one time. The sight of them and the sound of them was impressive.

*Cackling Goose:* The smaller size of this goose is the sure distinguishing-mark. A trained eye, such as that possessed by the men employed at the State and Federal Refuges and like that of Game Warden Tinnen, can distinguish this variety by its more erratic flight. Similarly a trained ear readily makes out its cackling call.

*White-faced Glossy Ibis:* One of the rarest observations of the month was found February 23, when with the Nature Study group of the Sierra Club, we flushed two birds of this species just at the roadside between Colusa and Williams. They flew out over a pond and were seen mingling with a circling flight of Pintail Ducks. They gave us plenty of time to observe them through binoculars and a high-powered telescope. This is an unusual record, because Hoffmann in "Birds of the Pacific States" says they winter occasionally as far north as Los Banos, which is also their most northern nesting ground in California. Two were seen in this same area on February 27.

*Ducks* were everywhere there was water, and there was water everywhere! I have never seen so many ducks, nor such good country for them. Abundant green feed and ideal shelter make this country just right for ducks. They have to be counted in thousands. I saw fourteen kinds of ducks. Pintails were the most plentiful and the most noticeable, especially toward the end of the month when their nearest rivals for census figures, the Mallards, were pairing off and beginning to look toward nesting activities. I like the Pintails, they are easily made out, they are plentiful and they are musical. Their soft whistle will ring a long time in my ears as I remember this month's birding. Gadwalls, not plentiful, but seen at Gray Lodge Refuge on several occasions. Green-winged Teal, Redhead Duck, Canvas-back, Lesser Scaup, American Golden-eye, Buffle-head, American and Red-breasted Mergansers, and Ruddy Ducks were also seen. Four is the number sacred to the California Indian and it seems to suit these wintering Ruddies too, for we so often saw that number of them bobbing along somewhat separated from other kinds of ducks on a pond.

*Vultures and Hawks:* A number of Turkey Vultures were to be seen practically every day over most of the region, and ten were counted in view at one time. Only one Cooper Hawk was seen during the month. Red-tailed Hawks were most numerous, perhaps twenty were seen well distributed on each day in the field. The Marsh Hawk was even more numerous than the Red-tailed, and several were seen in very light color phase. On the Sacramento Wildlife Refuge a pair were seen carrying nesting material to a mound in a field about the middle of the month. Duck Hawks were scarce, only two being seen, one near Sutter and the other near Willows. Sparrow Hawks, one to be seen every few hundred yards near roads traveled in the region.

*Yellow-headed Blackbird:* On February 20 while watching a large flock of Red-winged Blackbirds near Arbuckle, I discovered two male Yellow-headed ones. From this time on, all nearby flocks were scanned and on the 23rd, two more were discovered associated with Red-wings near the headquarters of the Sacramento Wildlife Refuge. Later on the 27th at least six were seen here. All over the region there were extremely large flocks of Bicolored Red-wings.

*Western Grasshopper Sparrow:* Several of these birds were observed February 17, near the Fremont Marker on the Butte House Road.



My list for the month also includes seventy other species, which would make this report entirely too long to cover in detail. Some of these species will be mentioned in an article written by Harold Kirker, a member of one of the groups which went out with me. The above account will give one a fairly good idea of what may be seen during the winter months in this part of California.

C. A. Harwell, California Representative, National Audubon Society.



### Birds of the Sutter Basin

The choice of the great Sutter Basin near Marysville for the initial western Audubon bird tours appeared to us particularly fortunate. Long a traditional winter home of uncouneted wild geese and ducks, this region supports one of the state's most varied bird populations. Aware of the promises which these water-soaked flats held, the Nature Study Group of the Sierra Club lost no time in accepting Bert Harwell's invitation for a Marysville week-end.

The morning of February 22, 1941, found thirteen Sierrans, a number of whom are also members of the Audubon Association of the Pacific, on the road to Marysville via Knights Landing road, where we were introduced to the birds of the Sacramento Valley. Ring-necked Pheasants ran in continuous numbers along the valley floor, Yellow-billed Magpies flashed among the trees, while out on the rice fields gathering flocks of geese gave us a first glimpse of what we had come to see.

Arriving at Marysville at about 9:30 a.m., we found Bert with a station wagon ready to take over the lead. Our caravan set off for the Robbins region, a few miles south of Marysville. Traveling along we found Shrikes and Red-winged Blackbirds arranged at almost even intervals on the telephone wires and from a roadside stump a Burrowing Owl blinked at the party.

Turning off the highway we proceeded along water-soaked dirt roads amidst the constant call of impatient geese, while ahead of us gathered a mass of Snow Geese.—Thousands of them! Small flocks of birds would rise under a leader, circle overhead, and light again among their restless fellows. Quietly we settled down to what was a new experience to most of us. For a long time we watched this animated spot of white, bordered by darker flocks of White-fronted Geese. Then in a deafening chorus the flock arose and choosing sides flew off in every direction. We had come to see geese, but thousands of them against a blue sky around which floated great white clouds was more thrilling than even the Audubon circular described.

To the north of us lay the Sutter Buttes, a fascinating range of volcanic rock, thrust solitary out of the valley floor. Lunching among them we found a pair of Rock Wrens with excitedly bobbing tails searching for a nesting site.

West of the Buttes lay the Sutter By-pass with a small flock of White Pelicans riding its muddy surface. Flooded fields with large numbers of geese and ducks stretched around us. A Prairie Falcon flew over from the Buttes where some high crag held his home. Behind us came the honk of the Canada Goose, warning of a long line of both Hutchins and Cackling Geese flying against the low hills. From the distance great streamers of Snow Geese flew high in a blue sky.

The road back to Marysville wound through trees where Red-breasted Sapsuckers, small flocks of Mourning Doves, Lark Sparrows and Mountain Bluebirds were observed. Along the highway in front of us flew a flock of Lewis Woodpeckers. These unique birds, crow-like with coarse red breast feathers were of great interest to the party.

The next morning found us early on the road to the Sacramento Valley Wildlife Refuge near Willows. Enormous flocks of geese, Snowy, White-fronted and the Canadas, gathered on the sides of the nearly flooded highway. At fairly close range we saw the Tule Goose, a larger, dark-breasted cousin of the White-fronted. Found wintering only in the Sutter Basin, there is much yet to be learned about the Tule Goose. Among the ducks were Pintail, Shoveller, and Ruddy Ducks, and in limited numbers American Golden-eyes and Buffle-heads. We were fortunate in flushing two White-faced Ibises and in discovering a Florida

Gallinule by the highway. After some searching we were rewarded by seeing two beautiful Yellow-headed Blackbirds surrounded by hundreds of Red-wings. At the refuge we saw more geese but in nothing like the numbers we had observed in the Sutter Basin. A flock of White Pelicans was feeding among some pink-washed Avocets. Tree Swallows hunted in groups over the rain-spattered surface. Overhead three Whistling Swans flew with slow dignity into a gray sky.

In the more wooded spots bird life was equally noticeable. There was hardly a bush which didn't hide a pheasant, the trees held the outline of many Red-tailed Hawks, while every little section of fence posts supported a Burrowing Owl.

Driving home in the rain we felt the satisfaction which is peculiar to bird-lovers; it was not only because we had a list which ran well into the seventies, but because we knew that the Audubon Marysville Tours had been a success. They not only afforded the bird-lovers a chance to thrill at the sight of unnumbered geese gathered over a sun-filled plain, but also they had shown to the people of Marysville that here was one more thing to attract people to their city. They as never before realized the value of these birds, the protection of which is so important, if this favored wintering ground is to continue not only to attract this great gathering of birds, but also the bird-lovers who enjoy the sight of them. We are glad to learn that Bert Harwell got Audubon Societies organized in Marysville, Sacramento and Stockton during February. This surely is a guarantee to the birds of increased understanding and protection.

Harold Kirker, Berkeley, California. March 5, 1941.



### Audubon Notes

**April Meeting:** The regular meeting will be held on Thursday evening, the 10th, at 8 o'clock, in the Old Mint Building, Fifth and Mission Streets.

The speaker will be Dr. Harold C. Bryant, Consultant, National Park Service, taking for his subject "Evidences of Bird Migration in Kings Canyon National Park." The lecture will be illustrated with Kodachrome slides.

Members may bring guests.

**April Field Trip** will be taken on Sunday, the 20th (note change of date), to McCoy's Ranch, Livermore, by private cars, meeting at the flagpole in Livermore at 9 o'clock. Please advise Miss Frances J. Blake, 1505 Holly Street, Berkeley, by April 10th, whether you need or can furnish transportation.

**March Meeting:** The 283rd regular meeting was held on Thursday, the 13th, in the Old Mint Building, with sixty-four members and guests present. President James Moffitt presiding.

The following were proposed for membership: Mr. and Mrs. Robert G. Shumway; Masters Jerry Gamble and Billy Green, all of San Francisco, and Miss Edna Schmidt of Ross.



**Tomales Bay Trip:** Mrs. Courtright reports that she and Miss Patricia McCarthy became separated from the group and that they observed an Osprey at Inverness, and Western Gnatcatchers in two other places, which were not recorded in the regular account of the trip.

## Audubon Association of the Pacific

Organized January 25, 1917

### For the Study and the Protection of Birds

President.....	Mr. James Moffitt.....	California Academy of Sciences, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco
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Monthly meeting second Thursday, 8 p.m., Little Theatre, Old U. S. Mint Building,  
Fifth and Mission Streets.

Membership dues, payable January 1st, \$3.00 per year.

Student memberships, \$1.50 per year.

Life memberships, \$50.00.

Members are responsible for dues until written notice of resignation is received by Treasurer.