

El Tecolote

NEWSLETTER OF THE SANTA BARBARA AUDUBON SOCIETY



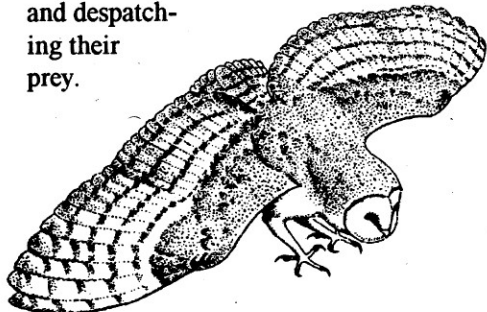
March 1993

Vol. 31, No. 6

Super Predator

PLUNGING silently down through the still night air, the great bird, talons extended, pounces on an unwary field mouse, killing it instantly. Yes, the owl is a skillful hunter, a killer, a powerful bird of prey — a “super predator.”

With extraordinary hearing, and eyes that can see by starlight, owls are superbly equipped for night hunting, quickly detecting and despatching their prey.



In fact, a pair of barn owls, with chicks to feed, will catch 20 to 30 mice in a night.

Characteristics

Only two groups of birds in the world have front-facing eyes — penguins and owls. This binocular vision gives owls excellent depth perception, making it easy to find the range of their target. The large wide-apart eyes are fixed in their sockets, however, which is why owls swivel their heads — some turning as much as 180 degrees either way!

Large wings (good for gliding) with flexible wing feathers finely fringed on the leading edges account for the owl's virtually soundless flight.

Owls vocalize with an extensive repertoire of shrieks, hoots and loud

caterwauling. Their voices have amazing human-like qualities, from the cough of a heavy smoker to the agonized scream of a woman in distress. “Hooting” serves two principal purposes: sexual attraction and territorial assertion. In springtime, most calling is done by cocks, hoping to attract hens. Because owls need a fairly large hunting area, hooting lets other owls know who “owns” the territory. Apart from territorial and mating calls, owls have softer, conversational calls used at close range between mates, and between parents and offspring.

Evolution

Owls have been around for a very long time: the oldest known fossil, *Protostrix mimica*, discovered in Wyoming, goes back nearly 60 million years. The evolution and distribution of owl species during the following millennia coincided with a great expansion in small-mammal populations.

Modern owls probably originated in Eurasia, about 36 million years ago. Barn owl species are around 12 million years old, dating from the late Miocene period, when *our* ancestors were still primates.

Distribution

Of the 130 or so living species of owls in the world today (on all continents except Antarctica), only 19 are native to North America. They range in size from the great gray owl, with a 5-foot wingspan, to the tiny insect-eating elf owl, spanning only a foot.

On this continent, owls have adapted to all kinds of habitats from dry, hot deserts to the icy, treeless arctic tundra.

March Program

Friday, March 26, 1993

Farrand Hall, SBNH Museum

7:45 p.m. Refreshments

8:00 p.m. Slide Program

“Battling the Inland Sea”

Dr. Robert Kelly, Ph.D. is a Professor of History at UCSB and author of *Battling the Inland Sea*. Dr. Kelly's interests are political culture, natural resources and water management. Tonight, the history and environmental transformation of the Sacramento River Valley will unfold. This area is of importance to Auduboners because it was once one of the largest wetlands. Neotropical migratory species still depend on its existence. See you there!

Year-round residents in Santa Barbara County are the barn, Western screech and great horned owls (all fairly common), Northern pigmy-owl (uncommon, seen on chaparral streamsides and canyons, and pine forests), spotted owl (rarely seen, preferring dense oak and sycamore canyons), long-eared owl (very rare, only found in the North County) and the Northern saw-whet owl (sometimes seen in the pine forests of Figueroa Mountain). Winter visitors (October to March) down from the northern plains and Canada include burrowing owls (rare, but have been known to breed in the Santa Maria and Cuyama Valley areas),



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Activities Calendar

Saturday, Mar. 13: Santa Barbara Harbor/ Bird Refuge

Birdwatching fieldtrip to see black skimmers, snowy plovers, loons, grebes, gulls and other birds often seen in the harbor and bird refuge. Meet at the Breakwater Restaurant at the harbor at 8:00 a.m. Leader: **Everett King** (962-0883).

Saturday, Mar. 27: Devereux Slough

Birdwatching fieldtrip and nature walk. Our local "snowbirds" are heading north again to breed. Shorebirds are starting to migrate and winter ducks are still possible. Meet at the west end of Del Playa Road in Isla Vista at 7:30 a.m. Led by local ornithologist **Rob Lindsay** (964-9514).

Wed.-Sun., Mar. 31-Apr. 4: Joshua Tree, Salton Sea and Anza Borrego

Four-day camping trip. Campsites have been reserved for 20 people. The first two nights at Joshua Tree National Monument, the third night at the Salton Sea Refuge, and then the last night in Anza Borrego. On our trip local naturalists will give talks on the wildlife and plantlife of these interesting ecosystems. We will see the California desert tortoise, least Bell's vireo, and special birds, flowers and plant species in the deserts, along with abundant waterbirds at the Salton Sea. A (mostly) tax-deductible donation of \$80 for Audubon members and \$90 for non-members will cover camping and organizational costs (food and transportation costs are not included in the fee). Carpooling is necessary. For a detailed itinerary, reservations and carpooling information contact **Ron Hirst** (967-0138) or the Audubon office (964-1468).

Saturday, May 22: Pelagic Birding Trip

Sponsored by the Ventura Audubon Society, this one-day trip from Ventura Harbor to Santa Barbara Island will be led by **Shawneen Finnegan** and costs \$50 per person. For information and reservations contact the trip coordinator, **Ginny Mickelson**, at (805) 653-0151.

How to Win Friends and Influence People . . .

. . . and have FUN doing it. Sign up now for our Audubon booth at **Earth Day, Sunday, April 25**, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., at Alameda Park. It's free, it's easy (we only ask for an hour of your time). Chat with local conservationists, make new friends, meet families you haven't seen for awhile. And best of all, help us hand out Audubon project fliers, and explain to little children the truth about the birds (we borrow some from the Natural History Museum) that soar above our booth; their wide eyes and big smiles make that hour go by so fast, and make it really worthwhile. If you can offer just one hour to help staff our Earth Day booth, please call the Audubon office at 964-1468 and leave your name and phone number. You won't regret it.

Chapter Kicks Off Local Compost Project

The Santa Barbara Chapter of the Audubon Society has joined with the National Audubon Society to support a two-month waste collection pilot project being conducted here in Santa Barbara County by the SB County Solid Waste Office. The project involves four neighborhoods on the South Coast where residents will separate their waste into different waste streams so that the County can determine the most cost-effective method of separating, collecting and processing "wet" compostable waste and recyclables.

Composting of organic wet waste is an innovative approach to waste management that requires the collection and separation of the wet (compostable) and dry (recyclable and non-recyclable) fractions of the waste stream. National Audubon Society supports separation of the wet compostable waste at the source (i.e. the home). The wet, organic material can be composted into a finished compost that can be used for landscaping, road projects, mine reclamation and landfill cover. The dry materials are sorted so that the recyclable materials are removed and processed, with the remaining waste being landfilled. *The important point is that the waste requiring disposal will be significantly reduced.*

The project is part of a three-year partnership between NAS and Procter & Gamble to create the necessary infrastructure to incorporate composting along with recycling by working with communities on pilot projects. A similar type project was conducted by Audubon and the grocery industry (including P&G) last year in Connecticut. The National Audubon Society supports waste composting because (1) it diverts waste from landfills, and (2) it can return valuable nutrients and organic material to the soil.

I shall be coordinating the project locally, assisting with education and implementation of the program, and can be reached at 684-5405, ext. 414, Carpinteria City Hall, from March through June.

— *Mindy Gottsegen*

Conservation Notes

◆ **Goleta Community Plan.** Adoption hearings before the Board of Supervisors will commence in March. Key conservation areas that may be attacked by the Supervisors include: Environmentally sensitive habitat "overlay," in the foothill/agricultural areas between Cathedral Oaks Road and the mountains; Riparian Protection Plan, to protect stream beds and their banks; and development pressure to intensify building on Santa Barbara Shores, Devereux, More Mesa and Bishop Ranch. It's urgent that you contact the Board of Supervisors (Naomi Schwartz, 1st District; Tom Rogers, 2nd District; Willy Chamberlin, 3rd Dist.; Mike Stoker, Chair) at 105 East Anapamu Street, Santa Barbara, 93101 (568-2191) to support those policies in the draft document. If you can come and testify,

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Conservation (Cont. from page 2)

call County Resource Management Department at 568-2000 for specific meeting times. These meetings represent the culmination of five years of community hearings to create a framework for Goleta for the next ten years.

◆ Environmental Thresholds.

Chairman Stoker is urging that politicians review and approve the environmental thresholds that govern when impact reports and zone changes must be made. Write or phone him (see above address and phone number) to emphasize that hard science, and not politics, should govern this process.

◆ Protecting Agriculture and Open Space.

Supervisor Chamberlin (3rd District) is considering a proposal that may, in the form of "preserving agriculture," make it easier for landowners to develop sections of their current holdings into residential uses. If this sounds contradictory to you, feel free to write him (see above address) and ask how developing Ag land "saves" it.

◆ **Costs of "Free"-ways.** CalTrans plans to use millions of local transportation tax dollars to add 2-4 lanes to 101 between Milpas and the Rincon, at the permanent expense of almost all the current landscaping in the median, the shoulders, and along the frontage streets (which may disappear). If this loss of habitat foliage and foraging corridors concerns you, please write or call County Supervisor Naomi Schwartz, and Santa Barbara Mayor Sheila Lodge (564-5318); 735 Anacapa Street, Santa Barbara, 93103, to register your thoughts. CalTrans' own statistics indicate that 75% of South Coast 101 traffic is local, and that less draconian local solutions might be available as an alternative to this very expensive project.

— Lee Moldaver



New SBAS Office Hours

Monday 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.
 Tuesday 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.
 Wednesday 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.
 Thursday 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.
 Friday 11:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

President's Message

Your Audubon chapter has been hard at work the past two months studying, testing and making our views known on a variety of local environmental issues, including the Goleta general plan update, Santa Barbara Shores Park plans, mowing issues in the North County, and more.

We're delighted too that our chapter and community have been selected by National Audubon to participate in a nationwide pilot compost project. See this issue for details.

Our Education Committee has reorganized and is ready to do educational presentations for schools and community groups. I want to thank our volunteer presenters Sheila Johnson, Don Rathbun,

Ron Hirst, Carlos Villegas, and Peggy Boucher for contributing their time to share nature's wonders with others. To arrange a slideshow or talk for your classroom or organization, please call our scheduler, Jean Mosely, at 964-1468.

Our search for a new chapter Treasurer continues — a critical position within our organization. Please call Ben Berkowitz or me to recommend a fellow Audubon member or to obtain more information about this chapter opening.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of our chapter's founding. To celebrate that and install our 1993/94 Board, we are planning a special 30th anniversary dinner for June. Watch *El Tecolote* for details.

— Sally Walker

"The Birds of Santa Barbara County"

Paul Lehman, Editor of *Birding* magazine, frequent contributor to *American Birds*, professional tour leader, and one of the foremost field ornithologists in North America has completed the most comprehensive, up-to-date book available on the status and distribution of the 446 known bird species of our county. His original thesis, on which this new work is based, is the most often cited document among state and federal agencies for avian resources between Monterey and Los Angeles counties. The species listings describe habitat types, seasonal abundance, arrival and departure dates of migrants, historical presence, and factors affecting changes in the species' status.

Publication is being coordinated by the UCSB Vertebrate Museum, headed by Mark Holmgren. Copies will be available later this year, for a minimum \$25. Amounts exceeding \$25 qualify as charitable contributions. Pre-publication orders and donations are being requested to help defray the high cost of publication.

To place an order, or receive more information, contact Mark Holmgren, UCSB Vertebrate Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106-9610. Checks should be made payable to: UC REGENTS/UCSB.

Wanted: Banded Bird Recovery Information

Some birders have recovered banding information either through observing the band numbers on larger, living birds or through salvage of dead ones. These records submitted to the US Fish & Wildlife Service have yielded valuable information on the movements of birds to and from Santa Barbara County. If you have received confirmation from USFWS of your sightings, please send the data to the address below, for incorporation in *The Birds of Santa Barbara County*.

Mark Holmgren
 Vertebrate Museum
 Department of Biological Sciences
 University of California
 Santa Barbara, CA 93106-9610

Owls (continued from page 1)

and short-eared owls (rare fall and winter visitors, sometimes seen on marshland and grassland near the coast).

Diet

Keen senses and a stealthy approach make owls fearsome predators. They take all manner of prey: insects, fish and frogs, lizards, mammals and sometimes small birds — even other owls.

Owl populations are directly proportional to the rise and fall in the numbers of small mammals, especially rodents.

Field mice (or voles) constitute the principal diet of most owls, but they will occasionally eat domestic chickens — if they can get at them! This of course infuriates farmers, who in turn try to shoot or poison the owls, forgetting their value as contributors to rodent control.

When small rodents are taken back to the nest, the owlets pick them apart; adults prefer to down their meal in one gulp. Owls' digestive systems, designed for rapid consumption of whole animals, can separate bones, fur, teeth, and other undigested parts into compact pellets that are periodically coughed up.

Folklore

From ancient times, owls and humans have had a love-fear relationship, the bird being prominent in legend and superstition. On the one hand, owls are thought of as wise old birds, symbols of

knowledge and intelligence, to be respected (Our *El Tecolote* owl is, of course, this kind — a benign messenger of interesting news and enjoyable stories!). On the other hand, seeing or hearing an owl is an omen of bad news to some folks, often foretelling imminent death.

So why do we have these powerful, mixed feelings? The bird's upright posture, flat round face, concentrated expression, prominent nose-like beak, and "ear" tufts, give it a humanoid resemblance. This characterization, together with the bird's human-like sounds, and its nighttime activities have established the owl in folktales, myths and superstitions.

To our ancestors (and perhaps to some of us still!), the night was mysterious, filled with spooks and demons — *ghosties and ghoulies, and long-legged beasties, and things that go bump in the night* — sinister things to be feared.

Is it any wonder we dread a creature that has mastered this eerie milieu? In the somber words of Sir Walter Scott:

*Birds of omen, dark and foul
Night-crow, raven, bat and owl.*

Owls may be predatory killers by nature, and symbols of doom and gloom in folklore, but in the final analysis they are an essential part of the world's declining biodiversity and we must do all we can to keep them alive.

— Dorin Mayes

SANTA BARBARA AUDUBON SOCIETY

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MEMBERSHIP

Special new member rate	\$20
Individual	\$30
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Senior citizen family	\$23

Please send only new member applications and *El Tecolote* subscriptions to: Santa Barbara Audubon Society, 5679 Hollister Ave., Suite 5B, Goleta, CA 93117.

EL TECOLOTE

Editor: Dorin Mayes 683-1079

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